

Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
20 Great Smith St
London
SW1P 3BT

03 August 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

With schools looking to fully re-open in September, I wanted to raise a few of the many issues that UNISON thinks still need addressing before schools can operate safely.

Cleaning

Firstly, we appreciate being consulted as part of the Ministerial School Stakeholder group. The staff we represent are half of the education workforce, but as they are not part of the education establishment their voices are rarely heard across the DfE. Access to ministers and officials and the chance to comment on draft guidance has allowed us to raise issues that we think are key. However, it has been disappointing that our contributions have generally not been properly reflected in final guidance. It adds to our concerns that the Department continues to favour the voices of teachers and heads, even during a time when schools and colleges would not have been able to operate without other vital staff.

A key issue that has not had the attention it deserves is the cleaning of schools and colleges. Government guidance makes clear that more rigorous and regular cleaning of settings will be central to keeping pupils safe come September. Cleaners have worked phenomenally hard during the pandemic and this has left them overwhelmed and exhausted. We have also seen them struggle at times to get certain cleaning materials. A move to wider re-opening will mean a significant increase in demand and we have concerns that the current staff will not be able to cope. Schools and colleges urgently need increased funding and more staff to deliver increases in demand.

The quality of cleaning is also important. Over 25% of school cleaners recently surveyed by UNISON stated that they have not had specialist training in how to conduct a 'deep clean', even though schools require them. Additionally, a fifth said cleaners didn't have appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). The recently updated PHE guidance was a slight improvement, but still leaves many questions unanswered, such as what constitutes a good 'deep clean'?

Another concern is the number of cleaners employed by private contractors. Many only qualify for statutory sick pay, provided they earn enough to qualify for this at all. Many on the minimum wage can't afford to be sick and so financial pressures push them to go to into their workplace putting themselves and others at risk. This risk is heightened as many cleaners have more than one job. We believe that all cleaners, whoever they are employed by should get contractual sick pay and at least the real Living Wage so they can afford to isolate to protect their school or college community.

We also know that in general a higher proportion of cleaners as well as other school and college staff are in higher risk groups e.g. more black and older workers. As far as we can see the evidence around transmission in schools and colleges is focussed on pupils and teachers/lecturers and does not address cleaners or other school staff working in education settings.

Different roles mean different risks

We believe that other school staff face additional risks, for instance assistants working in classrooms or doing small group or 1-2-1 work. Again, the arguments (we have not seen detailed evidence) that have so far been presented around PPE or face coverings do not take account of the different working practices of staff such as teaching assistants.

We understand from the guidance and discussions with officials that the DfE/PHE do not recommend face coverings because: 'bubbles' will limit mixing; teachers can social distance at the front of the class; younger children appear not to spread the virus as much as older children/adults (the theory being that young children are smaller and so not at equivalent face height with older children/adults) and that face coverings interfere with the education experience.

However, 1-2-1 and group work means social distancing isn't an option, staff routinely work at the same face height levels as pupils. Classroom staff are also being asked to work across bubbles and/or a large number have more than one job at the school/college/ breakfast club undermining the integrity of the bubble.

We believe that individual risk assessments are necessary for particular roles in schools and for staff in high risk groups. We cannot understand why this suggestion was not accepted by officials. We also believe that it would be sensible for the DfE to openly acknowledge that school support staff work differently to teachers, as one senior official did at a recent meeting, and that guidance on PPE/face coverings should reflect this. UNISON believes that in line with HSE guidance all staff should be allowed to wear face coverings if they choose and, further, that employers should provide such PPE where deemed necessary following individual risk assessment.

I would ask once again that we are provided with or pointed in the direction of evidence on risks for school staff rather than just for teachers.

Finally, over the summer we will be doing further work on catering staff and the deployment of teaching assistants in schools, which we will be in touch about in due course.

Yours sincerely,



Jon Richards
UNISON National Secretary
Education and Local Government