



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
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5 January 2021

Sent by email: Secretary of State: Sec-OF-STATE-Diary.PS@education.gov.uk

Dear Gavin,

In recent exchanges with the government about our advice to members we were assured that it is the strong wish of the Government to work with our unions to ensure that all education staff continue to work in as safe a way as possible.

Our members who are being asked to go into schools and nurseries are reporting considerable concerns about the situation they are being placed in. There are notable differences from the situation of the first lockdown, including the following:

- Nursery staff are very concerned that they are being required to work with full classes of children, with no social distancing, when the rest of the education sector is open only to vulnerable children and key worker children. They do not understand why they are being asked to go into work while others in primaries such as reception staff are not. Full nursery classes undermine the Government's aim of reducing the spread of the virus as adults and pupils mingle at the gates and in schools.

We note that Professor Calum Semple, a virologist and member of SAGE, when asked by the BBC if he could give any idea why early years settings were remaining open when schools were not, said 'No, I can't', and said that the decision to do so may be 'political' as it was not 'a scientific one'

You said, in your statement in the House today, in answer to Kate Green's question, that you had listened to scientific advice when you made the decision that early years settings would be fully open. We would be grateful if you could now inform us of the content of that advice and its source. This should provide reassurance to our members in early years settings that their health and safety is being properly protected by these arrangements.

We note also that:

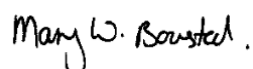
- The Government's wider definitions of 'vulnerable pupils' and those classed as key workers has led to significantly larger groups of pupils attending schools.
- pupils are being merged into larger mixed age classes – which clearly increases the danger of the risk of the spread of infection between pupils and between pupils and staff

- Staff are being asked to work across bubbles and being asked to work full time rather than being placed on rotas.
- despite additional risks from the new Covid variant which is estimated to be approximately 50% more transmissive, some schools have not updated their risk assessments.

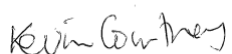
In some schools, combinations of these points mean that government plans to lower the spread of the virus will be significantly undermined.

We would ask for an urgent meeting to discuss these issues and find ways to ensure that guidance from the Department for Education addresses these issues.

Yours sincerely



Mary Boustead
Joint General Secretary



Kevin Courtney
Joint General Secretary

Jon Richards

National Secretary
Education, Local Government,
Police and Justice
UNISON