

Statement from the National Schools Committee: Covid staffing crisis in schools (England), January 2022

UNISON's National Schools Committee wants the best possible, high quality face-to-face education for all pupils in our schools. However, the government has failed to bring in sufficient mitigations in schools, particularly in primary schools where government guidance on face coverings and testing for pupils does not apply. Further, the vaccine is not yet being offered to all primary school children.

The rapid spread of the Omicron variant is leading to high numbers of staff absences in schools and beyond. In advice to school leaders, the Department for Education suggested that schools address workforce issues by using support staff "more flexibly" and "combining classes" to ensure settings remain open. UNISON believe this response is both unsafe and unfair to staff and pupils.

Practices such as merging classes will further increase virus transmission, illness and disruption, and could lead to safeguarding issues due to low numbers of staff on site. Further, using staff who are not qualified or paid to teach/cover classes is exploitative and inappropriate. UNISON members have gone above and beyond to keep schools running throughout the pandemic, and always want to assist wherever they can, but we cannot support unsafe practice and inappropriate deployment that will be detrimental to pupils' education. The government should provide sufficient funding for schools to be appropriately staffed to ensure that learning continues to take place, and for schools to be able to implement mitigations to ensure that classrooms are safe.

Whilst UNISON, of course, wants to see schools open to all, this should not be at any cost. Where schools face a staffing crisis, the risk assessment should be revisited and rather than creating unsafe arrangements by merging classes and deploying support staff inappropriately, schools should instead look to adopt a short period of online learning for the smallest necessary proportion of pupils (with vulnerable children and those of key workers as a minimum on site). This would reduce numbers on site, protecting face-to-face education for many, and help protect the quality of education.

UNISON also believe that sickness absence procedures relating to Covid should be suspended on a temporary basis due to the virulence of the virus and the lack of mitigation in schools. Some academies have already acted to suspend these procedures. This now needs to be explored further within all schools. We also need to make sure that private contractors, often in cleaning and caterings roles, are paid in full for Covid-related absences, in line with provisions for directly employed staff. This is so that staff can afford to isolate when necessary to reduce transmission.

UNISON members should not agree to unsafe practices such as the merging of classes, or inappropriate cover and deployment arrangements. We are advising members to raise such concerns immediately with their head. If the school insists on going ahead, members should urgently contact their local UNISON branch for support. In the case of a health and safety issue, branches can follow our local escalation procedure. Staff have a right to a safe working environment and individuals should not have to work where they reasonably believe that they (or others) face serious and imminent danger. [Our website outlines employers' legal health and safety responsibilities](#). The updated [joint union safety checklist](#) is also a helpful resource.

UNISON is keen to work with schools to get through the coming weeks. We recognise the pressure being put on school leaders and are keen to convey that the shortcomings in school policy are the result of Department for Education, rather than the efforts of school leaders.

Advice for members on cover issues

Throughout the pandemic, school staff have gone above and beyond to keep schools running and support children and young people. During this time support staff have stretched the boundaries of their job roles to help schools out while vulnerable colleagues were forced to stay away from work or while other colleagues were re-assigned to other areas. School meals workers, admin, estates staff, learning support, teaching assistants and all other support staff are all going the extra mile to help try and keep pupils safely in school.

UNISON fully understands the challenging circumstances in which schools are operating, but it is not fair to staff or pupils if staff are being deployed inappropriately or in an unsafe manner. Such practices are exploitative and detrimental to educational provision for pupils.

Covid absences in the coming weeks could put enormous pressure on staff and could mean staff being asked to cover absences for colleagues. Unless specified in their contract, this should be on a short-term basis only and mutually agreed. Any proposed changes in role or responsibility for support staff should be discussed and agreed with the individual staff member and be part of a risk assessment. Schools should not impose new roles or duties on staff. UNISON expects that changes which impact on others should be discussed with all those affected, and that the local UNISON reps/contact should be involved. If there are no school-based reps, then schools should contact the [local UNISON branch](#). Members who are unhappy with proposals or are aware that their school has not talked to the union should [contact their branch](#). Staff should not be exploited by schools and colleges.

What should I do if I'm asked to undertake a role that I believe is unsafe or that I'm not trained/qualified for?

UNISON members should **not** agree to potentially unsafe practices such as the merging of classes (which could increase covid transmission risk), or inappropriate cover and deployment arrangements. Our advice is to:

- Raise such concerns immediately with your line manager / head teacher.
- Speak to your local UNISON rep.
- If the school insists on going ahead, urgently contact your local UNISON branch for support.

In the case of a health and safety issue, branches can follow our local escalation procedure. Staff have a right to a safe working environment and individuals should not have to work where they reasonably believe that they (or others) face serious and imminent danger. [Our website outlines employers' legal health and safety responsibilities.](#)

What about special schools?

In special schools, recruiting suitable cover for absent staff can be challenging and disruptive for pupils. Where schools have staff shortages, they should use risk assessments and discussion with staff and parents to determine the best course of action in the circumstances.

What about staffing ratios in the Early Years Foundation Stage?

The government has advised early years settings in England that the current outbreak of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus can be considered as an 'exceptional circumstance' and as such, settings can open without applying the statutory staffing ratios at all times as set out in the [EYFS framework](#) as a temporary measure.

UNISON believes that this flexibility should only be applied in exceptional circumstances following a full risk assessment and that the safety of staff and children must remain paramount.

The government has emphasised that this is only a temporary measure and should only be applied for a short a period as is absolutely necessary.

Should teaching assistants/learning support assistants be leading classes?

UNISON has concerns that in schools with staff shortages, teaching assistants will be asked to lead full classes and cover full teaching duties. This would not be fair on staff or pupils. Any proposed changes in role or responsibility should be discussed and agreed with you.

Our clear position is that only suitably experienced teaching assistants should be asked to lead classes and then only in situations known about in advance, for example where a teacher is working from home due to being clinically extremely vulnerable and where another teacher is unavailable. Suitably experienced teaching assistants should only be those whose job description already includes this occasional responsibility, usually Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs, working at levels 4 and 5 according to the [NJC model job profiles](#)), and who are paid at the appropriate grade.

Where HLTAs are deployed to lead classes, they should be provided with enough time, within their contracted hours, in which to plan and prepare, including opportunities to liaise with class teachers. UNISON is clear that HLTAs should not be expected to lead classes on an indefinite basis. Any arrangement for a HLTA to lead a class should be reviewed and agreed with the staff member on at least a fortnightly basis.

UNISON released the findings of research into [TAs' experiences during the pandemic](#), led by the Institute of Education at University of London. These findings will inform our work to support TAs as we move into the next phase of the pandemic and recovery.

What about cover supervision?

Cover supervision should only be for a teacher's short-term absence from the classroom where the absence was not known about in advance (for example to cover short-term sickness) and pre-prepared work is available. To undertake cover supervision, TAs should have skills and knowledge of at least level 3 and be paid at the appropriate grade for this level (see the [NJC model job profiles](#)). In this situation there is no expectation that active teaching takes place. Rather, pupils should carry out a pre-prepared exercise under supervision. For more information see our [factsheet on cover supervision](#).

Schools should consider contingency arrangements for appropriate cover supervision in their planning.

What about cover for teacher PPA time?

Schools are required to put additional qualified staff into their timetable to ensure that teaching continues during PPA time.

Need further advice?

Please speak to your local UNISON rep, [contact your branch](#) or contact [UNISONdirect online](#) or via 0800 0 857 857. UNISONdirect's hours are Monday to Friday 6am to midnight, and Saturday 9am to 4pm.

For more information, [visit our website](#), [like us on Facebook](#) and [follow us on Twitter](#).

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