



Children's Commissioner for England
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

21 October 2022

Dear Dame Rachel de Souza,

We are writing to urge you to call on the government to take immediate action to help reduce the risk of Covid infections, and other virus-related absences, and therefore maximise attendance in schools.

The recent rise in Covid infections corresponded with a fall in school attendance, which according to the Department for Education (DfE) fell from 94.6% in week 37 to 93.5% in week 39 [Pupil attendance in schools, Week 39 2022 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/explore-education-statistics) This not only means lost learning for children but in many cases lost income for their households with parents having to take time off work, exacerbating the cost-of-living crisis.

We welcome your reported comments (Schools Week on 9 October) at a fringe event during Conservative party conference 2022 that you are not happy with 94 per cent attendance, and that schools would normally “*be looking at 98%*” at the start of term... “*The issue hasn't gone away.*”

In July we wrote to the former Secretary of State for Education, James Cleverly MP, calling on the government to use the summer break to invest in measures such as ventilation in all schools to help reduce the chance of yet another wave of Covid absences this term. Attached for your reference are copies of both our original letter and the response received.

You will see that the former Secretary of State did not agree to implement the additional measures on ventilation and funding over the school holidays. This was disappointing, as it came in the face of warnings from experts of the risk of high rates of infection over the winter, and as a result, yet another term of higher absences and lost learning in schools.

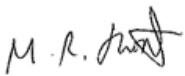
A key problem is that the DfE has set the criteria for providing additional support with ventilation and air filtration at such a level that the overwhelming majority of schools are denied support. The Centre for Disease Control in America recommends supplementing ventilation when carbon dioxide levels reach 800 parts per million (ppm) in a room, while the Federation of European Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning Associations (REHVA) stipulates a target of below 1000 ppm. Nations including Japan, Korea, Portugal, France, and Norway, have all set 1000 ppm of carbon dioxide as the standard for specific indoor environments, including school and office buildings. The DfE, however, is using a far higher figure of “*consistently above 1500 ppm*”.

As a result, only 1287 schools out of a total of 24,413 in England [CO2 monitor and air cleaning unit survey responses and applications for air cleaning units - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) have been provided with air filters, and given schools have multiple classrooms, and outbreaks have continued to affect attendance in schools, this is nowhere near sufficient.

You will be aware of a concerning potential correlation between the widening of regional differences in exam results [GCSE results 2022: Regional top grade gap wider after pandemic | Tes](#) and the higher proportion of lessons missed due to Covid absences in some regions. Further, provisional key stage 4 performance data [Key stage 4 performance, Academic Year 2021/22 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#) published by the DfE on 20 October shows that the disadvantage gap index is at its highest level since 2011/12.

We therefore urge you as Children’s Commissioner for England, with responsibility for promoting and protecting the rights of children, to publicly call on the government to agree to provide HEPA air filtration devices to **all** schools to supplement external ventilation as an immediate measure to help reduce illness and absences in schools. This is especially important given winter is approaching, and external ventilation is likely to be reduced even further to balance thermal comfort and the higher cost of heating. We would welcome an urgent response to our request.

Yours Sincerely,



Mike Short
National Secretary | UNISON



Clare Keogh
Regional Officer | Unite



Avril Chambers
National Officer | GMB