

4 April 2022

Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
Westminster
London
SW1P 3BT

Dear Secretary of State

As the trade unions and professional associations representing the vast majority of school and college leaders across the UK, we are deeply concerned about your government's apparent lack of concern and support for the pupils and staff in our schools and colleges as we move into the next phase of the pandemic.

Our members tell us that Covid-related disruption has been greater in many schools and colleges over the last few weeks than at any previous point during the pandemic. The latest government figures on attendance in education settings showed that Covid-related pupil absence on 17 March was 2.5% (up from 0.7% the previous fortnight), and teacher and leader absence was 9.1% (up from 5.8%). Almost a quarter of schools had more than 15% of their teachers and leaders absent. Anecdotally, our members tell us that the situation has worsened further in the intervening period.

In the face of this extensive and ongoing disruption, the government's decision to remove free access to symptomatic and asymptomatic testing for almost all pupils and staff feels reckless in the extreme. The government has also provided no evidence for its suggestion that children who do manage to obtain tests should only isolate for three days, rather than the five days recommended for adults. Together with a large number of other education organisations, we wrote to you on 9 March asking for tests to remain available to those working in our schools and colleges with possible symptoms of Covid, in order to reduce disruption to education. We have not received a response to that letter.

This ongoing disruption also makes the government's decision to publish Key Stage 4 and 5 performance tables this year, and to share the results of Key Stage 2 tests with Ofsted, even more inappropriate. As we have pointed out on many occasions, this plan seemed misguided when it was first announced; given the current situation in our schools and colleges it now feels frankly absurd.

These decisions have consequences. Failing to control the transmission of Covid in schools and colleges is making it increasingly difficult for leaders to keep their settings open, and to ensure pupils receive a high-quality education when they are there. This is compounding the educational disruption children and young people have already suffered over the last two years, which will affect their future opportunities. Allowing large numbers of staff and pupils to contract Covid, often multiple times, also has implications for their long-term health.

Refusing to recognise the impact on leaders, teachers, schools and communities of publishing inaccurate and meaningless data on school performance adds to the extreme stress under which education staff have been operating for more than two years now, and will exacerbate the recruitment and retention crisis that has been building for several years. Many members are telling us that this is the final straw which is leading them to step down from school or college leadership. We simply cannot afford, as a society, to treat leaders and teachers in this way.

If the government wants to gain the support of school and college leaders as it starts to take forward the policies in its recently published schools white paper and SEND green paper, it needs to do much more to support them with the current situation they face. It must reconsider its premature decision to end free access to Covid tests for symptomatic staff and pupils in schools and colleges, and it must commit to not publishing performance tables, or using this year's Key Stage 2, GCSE, A level or vocational exam results for any form of accountability, this year.

We have consistently made representations to you on these issues during our meetings with you, your Permanent Secretary and your senior officials. You will have noticed that these representations have become stronger and more frequent as a result of your continued failure to respond to the genuine and increasingly acute experience of our members.

Given the strength of feeling from our members on these issues, we are therefore taking the unusual step of making this an open letter. We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Handwritten signature of Geoff Barton in black ink.

Geoff Barton
General Secretary - ASCL

Handwritten signature of Paul Whiteman in blue ink.

Paul Whiteman
General Secretary – NAHT