



Confederation of School Trusts

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Robert Halfon MP
Chair of the Education Committee
BY EMAIL

22nd June 2020

Dear Mr Halfon

Follow up to Education Committee Evidence Session

Thank you for your letter and for inviting further evidence from the Confederation of School Trusts. During the session, you indicated you were interested in the examples I gave on practice in trusts, so I will focus attention on those examples here as a powerful way of giving evidence on the committee's lines of enquiry.

1. Confidence about reopening

In relation to confidence about reopening, there are indications that parental confidence is growing. Trusts are taking deliberate, positive action to build the confidence of parents and communities. For example, *The Embark Federation* is a family of seven schools across Derbyshire who believe that by working together as a team they can create schools that 'stand out' at the heart of their communities. They have four core beliefs; Family, Integrity, Teamwork and Success that are central to everything that they do. They have been working to stay connected to families throughout the crisis and have put in place what they call a reconnection and recovery pathway. Their recovery curriculum is called 'rising strong' and has been featured in several newspapers recently.

2. Impact on the workforce - teaching and support staff

Groups of schools working together in a single governance structure have shown themselves to be the most resilient of school structures during the lockdown. This is because they were able to leverage their strategic capability and capacity to support the schools in the group, both in terms of curriculum and in terms of the logistics of operational support - estates management, HR and workforce planning.

Let me give two examples:

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- *Delta Academies Trust*, which runs 46 schools, rapidly put in place a rota system such that staff across the trust were only required to be in schools for priority pupils once in a four-week rota. If week one was in school for a member of staff, week two was first standby for being in schools while working from home, week three was online support and week four was a rest week. This means that the trust could manage workload and wellbeing over the extended period.
- *The Cuckoo Hall Academies Trust* has surveyed their 350 staff members in their five schools to support their wider return to work, including questions on wellbeing. They have offered groups sessions with trained counsellors, to give staff the chance to talk through their experiences in a supportive and safe space. Half of their staff have asked to take part in these sessions – and they are expecting more as word spreads.

3. Impact on ability to support pupils

We have seen extraordinary acts of professional generosity during COVID-19 – teachers and leaders working together across schools and trusts to create the capacity to support all pupils. I would like to give two examples of these acts of collaboration:

- *Oak National Academy* – a national online classroom set up by more than 80 state schools and organisations across the sector, working together. It provides a sequenced plan of video lessons, following a clear curriculum. In the first two weeks of opening, 4.5 million lessons were accessed.
- *Starline* – a parent helpline for home learning. StarLine was set up by a group of education and parenting organisations. The helpline provides parents and carers the opportunity to ask questions about home learning from qualified teachers with substantial experience and expertise. Parents have an exceptionally difficult task trying to support their children's learning and juggling many other commitments. StarLine makes sure that additional advice, guidance and reassurance is available to families five days a week as they continue to work and learn in the home environment.

4. Impact on the most disadvantaged

As I said in my evidence, there is no universal response to the pandemic but some families are under considerably more stress. A recent NFER report says that teachers are in regular contact with on average 60 per cent of their pupils. However, pupil engagement is lower in schools with the highest levels of deprivation.

We know there are families for whom lockdown will have intensified stress on family life. There are also families where we had some concerns – and others where we had no concerns pre-Covid – who are now under considerable pressure.

I would like to give three examples of the brilliant work that trusts are doing:

- *The Ebor Academy Trust*, has created a bespoke Welfare and Well-being Team alongside their safeguarding team - this is bespoke and led by their Trust safeguarding lead. Their vulnerable children are identified for nurture sessions - these have been done through google meet / phone and have targeted particularly the disadvantaged in helping their social and emotional aspects - they felt this was important as fundamentally if we can keep this foundation fairly secure the learning, once returned to school will follow.

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- *The Schools Works Academy Trust* with 7 primary schools in West Sussex has set up resource stations around the reception areas of their schools so that parents can easily pick up hard copies of work available on websites and social media platforms - a small attempt to overcome digital disadvantage. These are surprisingly well used.
- *The Saracens Trust* has created Pupils' Learning Groups (forms) are a ratio of 1:13 and their teachers have been making weekly phone calls to parents to check on wellbeing and access to the curriculum

5. Impact on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) staff

We know from Public Health England data that after accounting for the effect of sex, age, deprivation and region, people of Bangladeshi ethnicity have around twice the risk of death than people of White British ethnicity. People of Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Other Asian, Caribbean and Other Black ethnicity have between 10 and 50 percent higher risk of death when compared to White British.

CST has been working hard with our member trusts to address this issue, including commissioning advice from our legal partner, Browne Jacobson. I would like to give you some examples of what our members have been doing to address this issue in the most sensitive and compassionate way:

- *The De Ferrers Trust* wrote to all staff just before May half-term, stating whatever they were planning on doing in terms of returning students, if staff did not wish to be in school for the rest of the academic year, they did not have to be - no questions asked.
- *The Focus Trust* has ensured BAME staff reps on their COVID Committee
- *The Eko Trust in Newham* has offered all BAME staff personalised co-constructed and confidential risk assessments.

6. Education provision for next academic year

We know the educational impact of COVID-19 will be significant. We are committed to ensuring that as many pupils as possible return to formal schooling in the Autumn in the safest possible way.

We do not believe in setting tests for Government because it is the job of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies and Public Health England to advise Government based on the evidence. We do however believe in a set of principles that should inform decisions going forward. These principles have been developed with CST's members.

- **Equity:** the just provision and distribution of resources to pupils in a way that reflects their needs and requirements, positively impacting those who have increased vulnerabilities, have the most significant gaps in learning and the lowest engagement with remote education.
- **Resilience:** the need to find solutions that adapt well in the face of multiple stresses on individuals, families, schools and the sector and can take account of local lockdowns.
- **Flexibility:** leaders must be trusted to exercise discretion and good judgement to suit their context and in the best interests of their pupils, parents and communities based on acceptable minimum levels of provision.

We propose that schools and trusts should plan for three scenarios for next academic year, but we need Government to confirm this position.

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1. Full return when it is safe to do so, including protective measures

Focus on curriculum recovery and emotional and family support as necessary. Protective measures could include unwell staff and students stay home, cleaning hands more often, ensuring good respiratory hygiene, cleaning frequently touched surfaces.

2. Rotas with blended learning if social distancing is still in place

Schools and trusts decide operational delivery model based on principles set out by Government. Blended learning is put in place, ensuring curriculum continuity between classroom provision and remote education. A national solution to remote education provision is available for those schools that are unable to support both classroom provision and remote education. Protective measures include unwell staff and students stay home, cleaning hands more often, ensuring good respiratory hygiene, cleaning frequently touched surfaces. Some social distancing in place (but unlikely to be 2m)

3. School closure and/or local lockdown where this becomes necessary

Onsite provision put in place for critical workers, vulnerable children and where possible examination groups. Other groups move to remote education.

Finally, in relation to the last point, we think Government should review how decision-making is constituted and be crystal clear on the relationship between national, regional and local decision-making. The role of Public Health England, the statutory duties of local Directors of Public Health and the corporate public health duties of local authorities during COVID-19 need urgent clarification.

A hierarchy of decision-making showing which entities make decisions and distinguishing between decisions and advice is required.

We propose that a nationally agreed format for risk assessments that all Directors of Public Health will use, including the range of data and evidence (supplied by the Joint Bio Security Centre) that inform the risk assessment would help to bring consistency and build public confidence.

Decisions on whether to open or close a school must remain the obligation of those responsible for governance (governing body for maintained schools or trust board), advised by school and trust leaders, because of their legal liabilities as an employer under Health and Safety legislation.

Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee. CST would be pleased to give evidence on further occasions.

Yours sincerely



Leora Cruddas
Chief Executive