

Written evidence submitted by Us for Them

Robert Halfon MP

Chairman, Education Select Committee

6th September 2020

Dear Mr Halfon,

Re: Return to school – how different schools are implementing the new guidance

UsforThem leaders are due to meet with you on 16th September. In the meantime, I promised to send information coming back from our members about the way different schools are interpreting the latest government guidance. A variety of different concerns have been reported to us on the overzealous and at times draconian approach. Having said that, we have had a number of reports from parents of both primary and secondary school children saying their schools have been absolutely brilliant, made the children really welcome and absolutely made any new ways of working as inobtrusive as possible – so we know it can be done. I will summarise the different approaches:

Face masks in communal areas:

- We have numerous reports of face masks in communal areas being made mandatory in schools not in local lock down areas, often two adjacent schools have different rules and yet the school buildings are very similar so no clear explanation. When parents question this, the response invariably is that it is ‘to keep the whole school community safe’
- Exemptions: Some schools have a simple request that parents just email the school office to let them know, so that their child won’t be unnecessarily challenged. Others are requiring a GP letter though this is clearly not in government guidance. Some schools are issuing lanyards or lapel pins which immediately label the child as having a disability. One school has stated in its policy – “If an individual student’s circumstance means that wearing a face covering is not appropriate we again request that parents contact the school to discuss the context and to explore a reasonable way forward that supports the safety and well-being of the school community as a whole.” The implication of this is that parents and children will be pressurised to change their minds & comply with the new school rule.
- Most schools requesting masks have asked children to bring their own but said there will be spare masks in schools if needed. But one school has stated, “any pupil not wearing a mask will be sent home”
- The worst example till yesterday was Brighton College School, which has a large sign at the foot of the stairwell reading, “No mask on your face? You big disgrace, Spreading your germs all over the place”. But on Thursday in another school, 250 children without masks on their first day back were made to stand up in assembly and be publicly reprimanded for failing to keep other people safe.

Face masks in classrooms:

- Several schools are mandating masks in all practical lessons including science, computer studies & home economics. Holmes Chapel School is mandating school in **all classrooms**, ignoring government guidance that this is not necessary and would be likely to interfere with teaching and learning, let alone advice that wearing masks for prolonged periods is likely to increase transmission of the virus.

- Eaton Mill **Primary** School in Milton Keynes has implemented compulsory face masks or visors throughout the day for all pupils from Year 1 upwards, for reception children they are strongly recommended. The headteacher's letter **told parents who didn't like it, to send their children to Hogwarts**. He might think the wording amusing, but to me it shows a flagrant disregard for the children's right to continue attending their local school.

Face masks in public & outdoor areas:

- The Billericay School requires masks to be worn at all times, even in outdoor play areas. It is also saying masks must be worn on the way to school if walking with children from other 'bubbles'.
- We have an example of a primary school insisting parents wear masks when collecting children from school which is a potential safeguarding disaster as adults in masks will all look very similar.

Outdoors in all weathers:

- A number of schools are insisting children are outdoors for all break & lunchtimes regardless of weather. This combined with windows wide open to enhance ventilation has resulted in families reporting their children coming home from school shivering having spent the whole afternoon sitting in wet clothes.

Excessive use of hand sanitiser & cleaning products:

- Some schools have installed big sinks in playgrounds so children can wash their hands with soap & water on arrival. Others have had to rely on hand sanitiser, but again whereas many schools are asking for this to be used on arrival and before eating and obviously after going to the toilet, others are requiring hand sanitiser to be used every hour or at every change of classroom plus asking the children to use chemical sprays & wipe their desks at each class change. We had reports of children whose hands were red & raw last term in England and also within the first week back in August in Scotland. There is real concern about effect of overzealous cleaning on children's natural immunity to germs they meet in everyday life.

Poor practice for reception classes:

- Several reception class members have been told that there is no 'settling in' allowed and that social distancing is being enforced, unlike in Early Years provision.

Concerns about track & trace:

- There are grave concerns that in an autumn of the usual coughs & colds, children will be subjected to repeated and uncomfortable testing. Testing of asymptomatic children will be likely to result in numerous false positives and hence classes sent home and education disrupted unnecessarily.

ACTION requested

We would be very grateful if you could raise the following points most particularly through the work of the Education select committee

- What action will the DfE take to curb the most extreme measures in Does the DfE have an exit strategy? All these measures are distracting from provision of education
- What monitoring is in progress in schools relative to measures implemented - impact on inclusion/ attendance/ education outcomes as required under WHO guidance?
- How long will testing of asymptomatic children be continued and at what point will numbers of symptomatic cases be used to guide policy rather than numbers of positive tests?

Many thanks for considering these points. Please let me know if you need further information before our meeting.

Ros Maidment

Us for Them administrator & retired paediatrician

September 2020