

JWH/xst/GW

14 September 2020

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA



Tanbridge House School
Farthings Hill, Guildford Road
Horsham, West Sussex, RH12 1SR

Dear Mr Williamson,

Headteachers across the country have worked tirelessly to support the government's 'back to school' agenda. From the outset, we all understood that it is imperative that pupils return to school to support their academic progress and general wellbeing.

We are delighted, therefore, that initial national attendance data suggests that around 90% of children are back in school and in many cases, attendance is even higher.

At the same time, headteachers are becoming increasingly frustrated that after such a concerted effort our ability to ensure that our schools function properly and that children have a teacher in front of their class (with associated support services from teaching assistants and the like) is being severely hampered by a test and trace system that is simply not working effectively enough.

In short, the following serious issues are arising:

- Staff who are being advised to self-isolate, for a variety of reasons, are unable to get a test quickly enough and or at a local test centre
- When staff – or members of their household / contact group – finally get a test, the results are taking far too long to be returned. Often, staff who are otherwise fit for work are out of action for three days or more.
- Prioritising tests and high speed return of the results for 'essential workers' is virtually non-existent
- Costs on school budgets when supply cover is used is already becoming prohibitive.
- The likely negative impact upon pupil attendance as families wait too long for testing and results

After just a few days of the autumn term these factors – along with inevitable fact some colleagues having to isolate for 10 -14 days periods - are coming together to present serious risks to the consistent and effective availability of in school provision for all pupils. The threat of partial rolling closures because of serious staff shortages is significant. In addition, many pupils, who have lost far too much learning time already and are just months away from crucial A Level, GCSE and SATs exams are missing having specialist teachers in front of them.

Headteachers and dedicated colleagues in our schools feel that we are fighting an epidemic with one hand tied behind our backs. Matters are set to get far worse when the regular cough and colds of the autumn and winter seasons kick -in. To function effectively, schools need effective and urgent support now rather than vague promises for the future.

You will recall that on 24 August 2020 we raised concerns about the inability of the Department for Education to listen effectively to headteachers. We are extremely disappointed that you have failed to respond to our letter or even acknowledge receipt of it. A number of highly important issues were raised. We have no choice but to assume that these concerns and legitimate professional worries are often being ignored. Despite public announcements and reassurances such failings are symptomatic of the serious reservations that we currently feel.

Headteachers and all of our colleagues in school are determined to help in the fight against an epidemic that is causing such far reaching and unwanted consequences. Sadly, we will not be able to if we are not provided with the tools to do so.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jules White', written in a cursive style.

Jules White
On behalf of the 'Worth Less?' campaign group