

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

CC: Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP

20th May 2020

Dear Prime Minister

We write to you on behalf of the members of the Chartered College of Teaching. As the professional body representing teachers across the country, in all stages of their career, we urgently seek clarity on five key areas relating to the reopening of schools to more pupils.

Navigating this current crisis is extremely difficult and there are no easy answers. We recognise that research evidence regarding the safety and potential impacts of opening schools to more pupils is limited and can be contradictory. Teachers and leaders appreciate the severity of the current situation and the immense challenges being considered. However, our members too face daily challenges in supporting their pupils' learning and wellbeing, while also protecting the health and safety of their colleagues and managing depleted resources.

Transparency and honesty are critical when it comes to the decisions you and your government are making and how they are communicated. Guidance must be clear and timely, and it is imperative that the views of the profession are listened to. Teachers are experts who should be valued and heard - not criticised.

We request that you provide Chartered College of Teaching members and the wider profession with the following:

1: Detail on the scientific evidence-base for schools being reopened more widely

We recognise that the research on COVID-19 and how it infects, affects, and is spread by children is still emerging, as is evidence around the role of school closures in controlling the spread of the virus. Concern about the high number of cases and the lack of a full testing, tracking and tracing mechanism has been highlighted by scientific experts as a reason that reopening schools is still currently too high-risk. The research used to inform decision-making needs to be made publicly available on an ongoing basis. The publication of the overview of scientific advice the Department for Education has received was a positive step, but it lacks references and details of the studies

used to inform the advice within. This undermines confidence in the decisions that are being made and the assurances that opening schools more widely will be safe.

2: Clarity over the risk and purpose of reopening schools more widely before summer

The Government needs to be clear and honest about the risk and purpose of reopening schools more widely at this stage, and about the trade-off for the risk. We recognise the impact that school closures may have on our most disadvantaged pupils in particular. However, it is not clear how reopening schools to selected year groups is the most effective way to prevent the disadvantage gap from widening still further.

If the decision to reopen for selected year groups is as much about the economy and enabling parents to return to work as it is about learning, this must be stated openly. It will have implications for the approaches schools take to reopening and the forms of education that they deliver, both for those pupils in the classroom and for those continuing to learn at home.

3: Clear guidance with sufficient notice for schools to make use of it

Given the inevitable risks to larger numbers of pupils returning to school, the decisions made around the approaches schools take may have serious consequences, and the government cannot divest itself of responsibility for these. Interim analysis of our survey to members highlights that a lack of clarity and guidance has increased teachers' anxiety and the pressure they feel under. The guidance released so far has, in some cases, shown a lack of understanding of what is practical and feasible in schools - something greater involvement of expertise from the profession will help to correct.

Guidance has often been released too late, meaning either that schools begin to make plans which then must be changed, or they do not have time to develop their approaches fully. School leaders also feel frustrated at often finding out the latest plans via leaks to the press, rather than being treated as professionals who deserve to be given information directly, as soon as it is possible to do so.

4: Pledge to value the contribution of teaching staff and prioritisation of health and wellbeing

Our profession has been doing an incredible job throughout the pandemic - from shifting to a new model of teaching and embracing new ways of working to supporting parents to deliver home learning and calling and emailing to check on pupils.

Attacks on teachers from certain sections of the media or questioning unions' motives for standing up for their members undermine the contribution that teachers are making and increase the pressures they are under. The government needs to ensure these narratives are robustly rebuffed. Teachers and school leaders want to be able to go back to what they do best and to support the pupils they are responsible for. However, they are rightly concerned at being asked to do this at the risk of their health, that of their families, and those very pupils they are concerned about.

Teachers will also need support in their roles – and they deserve reassurance that this will be suitably provided. As well as facing academic challenges when schools return, teachers will also be expected to support pupils who have experienced bereavement or trauma. They will clearly need help and training in these areas, and it's crucial to be mindful of the limits to what they can reasonably be expected to do.

5: Commitment to ongoing, meaningful consultation with the teaching profession

Ongoing, meaningful consultation is key to ensuring that teachers feel valued, listened to and trusted. Maintaining dialogue with the teaching profession also ensures that outcomes are practical and feasible. The Chartered College of Teaching and teaching unions are regularly consulting

members and sharing their views and expertise; the government needs to take these seriously and respond to them transparently.

We know that our teachers will do everything they can to provide the best possible education. However, to do so they must have adequate support from the Government and clear guidance that they are consulted on and able to contribute to. That way, we can ensure we are all able to move forward together when it is safe to do so.

We look forward to your answers.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dame Alison".

Professor Dame Alison Peacock
Chief Executive