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Rt. Hon. Gavin Williamson

Secretary of State for Education

Sanctuary Buildings

Great Smith St

London, EC1V 4PY

[SENT ELECTRONICALLY]

18th December 2020

RE: DEPLOYMENT OF LATERAL FLOW RAPID RESULT TESTING IN ENGLISH SCHOOLS

Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing to inform you that GMB are advising our school staff members not to volunteer to carry out the testing on staff and pupils as you roll out your proposal to convert school premises into Covid-19 testing centres for staff and pupils, until such time as you put adequate training, support and safeguards in place.

GMB represents 100,000 schools-based members and we do not have confidence in the current government advice which directly impacts upon school staff members.

We welcomed the meeting with departmental officials this week regarding a roll out of testing for school staff and pupils. We all want to combat Covid-19 and protect not only pupils, but the whole schools' workforce as well.

However, at our initial meeting we highlighted a range of concerns including a lack of qualified and trained medical professionals available to oversee and conduct the tests; the high

percentage of false negative results associated with the usage of lateral flow testing; and potential risks including liability and associated costs. We urged caution about quick announcements and sought agreement that further meetings would be required to iron out potential pitfalls and ensure a roll-out of testing procedures that are safe, effective and reliable, and that could be supported by parents, communities and staff.

Sadly, our concerns have been ignored. You made the announcement without any detail about how it would work in practice. Operational details will not be issued until next week when all schools will be closed for the Christmas holidays.

GMB concerns which have yet to be addressed include the following:

1. Support staff numbers have been cut to the bone due to lack of funding and are further impacted by absences due to the pandemic. Currently staff numbers are risk assessed - taking staff away from their existing roles will have implications for pupil safety as well as educational achievement.
2. The pilots offer inadequate evidence of safety since external trained staff were brought in, which we understand will not be the case in this roll out.
3. You propose that volunteers such as parents and governors could be brought in to conduct the tests. This is a medical procedure you are expecting non-medically trained volunteers to carry out. In addition, GMB believe in this scenario volunteers working with pupils would need DBS checks all of which takes time. We will not endorse any implementation that permits non-DBS checked individuals to deliver the testing programme.
4. GMB believe that training and clinical oversight should be the responsibility of an external clinical team, and not with the headteacher who already has a challenging job in making schools Covid safe whilst delivering education.

GMB is generally supportive of a testing programme to identify asymptomatic staff and pupils with Covid-19. But testing kits are being delivered to schools without the medical oversight, staff or adequate training to conduct the tests effectively, accurately and safely. It appears schools will just be left to get on with setting up testing centres.

GMB are greatly concerned that staff who are not medically trained will feel pressured into performing these tests on other staff and students, with inadequate training on how to do so with no real safeguards in place. Indeed a total of 7 new job profiles have been drawn up for staffing testing centers.

Research into the use of Innova Lateral Flow tests by Public Health England and Oxford University determined that a false negative result was determined 21% of the time when testing was performed by a scientist; this increased to 27% when performed by a medical professional, and more than doubled to 42.5% when those tested administered the test themselves. These findings have been confirmed by the mass testing programme in Liverpool where less than 50% of results were accurate.

We therefore have severe concerns that lessons have not been learned from the Liverpool programme; that inadequate time is available for a full training and practical supervised experience that will result in competent testers; and potentially what the Government perceives as a 'game changer' will result in huge numbers of false negative results that create false confidence, rather than the hoped for 'magic bullet'.

The fact is that it is highly unlikely that staff, pupils or parents will have confidence in barely trained non-professionals administering medical procedures.

Employers were threatened with legal action for taking a sensible precaution of closing schools a few days early at the end of term just days before you announced that secondary schools would start late in the new term. We cannot understand the logic behind that.

GMB calls for the existing sensible control measures including isolation of bubbles to remain in place. The mass testing, particularly given the high number of false negatives, cannot be a substitute for other control measures like bubbles, isolation, masks and ventilation which must stay in place, so that the testing is an additional measure in schools, not a replacement.

We believe it is critical that we don't throw away our hard-won gains at this late stage, when a well-considered and properly implemented programme delivered by fully trained competent staff can deliver the assurance we all want.

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GMB has taken the decision to advise our members not to volunteer to carry out the testing on staff and pupils, until we get satisfactory reassurances on a number of issues including safeguards. We have grave concerns about the lack of medical oversight, online training for what is a medical intervention, and also about protections from liability for our members. School support staff do the job because they love working with pupils and supporting their education, and they are absolutely committed to work as a team to help schools remain open. But we remain unconvinced that schools can be ready to roll this out, so we cannot advise our members to volunteer with so many vital questions as yet unanswered all at a time when schools are closing today for the Christmas break.

Yours Sincerely,

Karen Leonard

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