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**Friday 8 May 2020: for immediate release**

TUC press office: 020 7467 1248

## Unions set out needs for safe reopening of schools in letter to Education Secretary

The TUC is today (Friday) publishing a joint statement that was sent yesterday evening to the Secretary of State for Education on behalf of unions with members in the education sector outlining the measures needed for the safe reopening of schools.

The statement from GMB, NAHT, NASUWT, NEU, UNISON and Unite sets out key principles and tests for the reopening of schools in England to ensure the safety of children, parents, staff and the communities they serve.

The principles and tests include (see notes for the full statement):

- Safety and welfare of pupils and staff as the paramount principle
- No increase in pupil numbers until full rollout of a national test and trace scheme
- A national Covid-19 education taskforce with government, unions and education stakeholders to agree statutory guidance for safe reopening of schools
- Consideration of the specific needs of vulnerable students and families facing economic disadvantage
- Additional resources for enhanced school cleaning, PPE and risk assessments
- Local autonomy to close schools where testing indicates clusters of new covid-19 cases

TUC General Secretary **Frances O'Grady** said:

"Parents and staff need full confidence that schools will be safe before any pupils return.

"The government must work closely with unions to agree a plan that meets the tests we have set out. Those discussions must include unions representing all school workers, not just teachers.

"The best way to do this is through a national taskforce for safe schools, with government, unions and education stakeholders. Schools must also get extra funds from government to pay for essential safety measures like PPE and additional cleaning."

**ENDS**

**Notes to editors:**

- **Press contacts:**

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## **Full statement to the Secretary of State for Education:**

### **Joint Statement on the Future Wider Reopening of Schools**

**GMB, NAHT, NASUWT, NEU, UNISON, Unite**

#### **Introduction**

This joint statement sets out a number of key principles and tests that the school workforce unions believe are essential to have in place before any plans are taken forward to reopen schools in England more widely in the coming period.

The statement is on behalf of the education unions GMB, NAHT, NASUWT, NEU, UNISON and Unite. The unions believe that the government should commit to work with the unions and others to agree a set of principles and tests to ensure that systems are in place in schools for the safety of children, parents/carers, staff and the wider communities they serve, in advance of any planned reopening.

The wider reopening of our schools will depend greatly on ensuring that families and carers are fully confident that allowing their children to return to school is safe. We do not believe that sufficient levels of confidence exist at this time. However, we believe that meeting the following principles and tests will help to achieve this.

#### **Key principles**

- The wider reopening of our schools will underpin efforts to restart the UK economy, but it is vital that the paramount consideration on this issue is the safety and welfare of students, their families, staff and the wider public. Schools are already playing a key role in supporting the continuing education of all children within their school, children of key workers, vulnerable children, and the maintenance of essential public services and industries. This will continue to be a priority under any planned wider reopening. However, an unsafe return will only serve to break the bond of trust between school and home that will in turn mitigate against a successful long-term economic recovery. Schools are rooted in their communities and are subject to the same pressures as everyone else.
- Public health considerations and the serious risks of increasing transmission rates of Covid-19 must be the primary criteria governing the strategy for wider reopening of our schools. There are a number of key tests that will need to be met prior to any final decision on increasing pupil numbers to combat the risk of an increase in transmission rates resulting from a premature wider reopening.
- The wider reopening of schools will require agreement by employers and trade unions on a range of procedures to make sure schools are safe environments for children, their families and carers, and staff. These will include robust risk assessments in advance of schools reopening and the conduct of these assessments will be supported through the provision of clear national advice and guidance.
- A strategic approach will require government to immediately establish a national Covid-19 education taskforce comprising government, the education trade unions and other key stakeholders. The taskforce should develop statutory guidance and a strategic approach to reopening schools at the local level.
- Wider reopening will need careful consideration to achieving equitable outcomes, including the impact on the mental health and living standards of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and

their families, and BAME groups. Communities facing the greatest challenges before the pandemic are being hit hardest by Covid-19 and our schools must be fully supported by government including with additional financial support as required to help them.

### **Key tests**

- There must be clear scientific published evidence that trends in transmission of Covid-19 will not be adversely impacted by the reopening phase and that schools are also safe to reopen. Government should also be in a position to assess that pupils, parents/carers and staff are confident that this is the case.
- There should no increase in pupil numbers until the full rollout of the government's "test, trace and isolate policy" with testing targets consistently met over a number of weeks and case numbers falling consistently. A wider reopening before such a regime is in place would be completely unviable and would risk increased transmission levels, and ultimately deaths.
- A phased approach should be kept under constant review with no expectation that more pupils will return before the science shows that this is safe.
- There must be agreement between government, employers and unions that operational practices and procedures in schools meet minimum quantifiable standards, in particular regarding social distancing, hygiene and cleansing practices, a secure supply of appropriate PPE to all school settings to be available where required, including clear guidance on situations where physical contact with pupils cannot be avoided, and regular robust risk assessments.
- Enhanced school cleaning with additional resources subject to risk assessment and all necessary PPE to keep them safe.
- A phased return of pupils will be necessary and this will need to meet tests that the most vulnerable pupils are being prioritised and that the phased approach supports maintaining a safe environment and reduced transmission levels.
- Governing Bodies and School leadership teams should continue to make decisions to close schools in cases of local outbreaks/upsurge in Covid-19 cases. Schools will need local data as part of the government's testing and tracing strategy. Consultation with the unions is an important step in this process as is ensuring that decisions are taken in a way that complies with all relevant national guidance and advice on these matters.
- Clear strategies for safeguarding the most vulnerable pupils and staff, including those who have an underlying condition, are pregnant, over 70 or in the shielded group, and those who live with (or care for) anyone in these categories. These pupils and staff should be allowed to self-isolate or work from home.
- An assessment of the impact of wider school reopening on other key public services, in particular public transport and the risks for increased transmission rates in that context.
- A clear commitment to collective negotiations with school unions on reopening and instances of local Covid-19 outbreaks or increased transmission levels.

### **STATEMENT ENDS**

- **About the TUC:** The Trades Union Congress (TUC) exists to make the working world a better place for everyone. We bring together more than 5.5 million working people who

make up our 48 member unions. We support unions to grow and thrive, and we stand up for everyone who works for a living.