

Minister for Education
Welsh Government
5th Floor
Tŷ Hywel
Cardiff Bay CF99 1NA

9 June 2020

Dear Minister,

Re: Re-opening schools

We are writing to you in response to the statement you made on Wednesday 3 June about the 'next phase' for schools ("Check in, Catch Up, Prepare for summer and September" – all schools in Wales to enter next phase').

UCAC, alongside other education unions, has been in regular discussion with your officials since the beginning of this emergency, including the difficult issue of increasing the operation of schools. The discussions have been open, honest and constructive, resulting in a sensible and measured way forward for pupils and school staff in Wales.

We were all the more shocked therefore at Wednesday's announcement, which contradicted the advice given by UCAC and other unions about the safety of a general return to school for all pupils before the summer.

As you will know, there was a feeling that a September return would be the wisest option, but that a return of Years 6, 10 and 12 before the summer – although challenging – could be workable. Indeed, in our response to the proposals, we made it clear that amongst our members the response to a return for all school years before the summer was "almost universal rejection – and alarm – at this proposal."

The contents of this letter have been guided by the response from our members to the announcement on 3 June, and discussions within our internal democratic structures. Our phonedlines, inboxes and social media channels have been inundated with enquiries, and it is important that you understand that the concerns outlined here are a reflection of the response of the profession.

We have also considered the draft Operational Guidance and Learning Guidance, though it should be noted that local authorities have already started making their own arrangements based on your statement.

Under the current circumstances, the practical, logistical considerations involved in seeking to give every pupil the opportunity to return to school before the summer are mind-boggling. Whilst we await publication of Welsh Government guidance on these matters, we have submitted a lengthy list of questions to your officials and I append the list to this letter. The responsibility on individual schools, and particularly school leaders is enormous.

UCAC believes that the risks the Government is asking the school workforce to take are unacceptably high. Even the most careful planning and detailed guidance means that school staff will be exposed to levels of risk that we are of the view are unnecessary and irresponsible. It is worth noting that in many local authority areas, teachers are being asked to state whether or not they will be able to return to school on 29 June, without knowing what arrangements will be in place to ensure their safety.

In essence, the greater the number of children, the greater the risk. Even if the number of other children to whom pupils are exposed is limited (for example, by staggering entry), over the course of the four weeks, school staff will have been exposed to children from a very large number of households. School staff will also be concerned for their own children and their levels of exposure if they now have to attend hubs.

Staff working in the Foundation Phase are facing very serious risks as it is generally accepted that children of this age are unable to socially distance within a school setting – and indeed, their emotional and physical needs require physical proximity from staff, which it will be extremely difficult – if not impossible - to withhold.

We were in total agreement with the 5 key principles you outlined for determining when and how schools would increase operations. However, we are not convinced that the decision announced on 3 June meets the first 4 of those 5 principles.

- 1. The safety and mental, emotional and physical wellbeing of students and staff:** the level of alarm expressed by members in the short time since the announcement is an indication that the decision is not conducive to the mental and emotional wellbeing of staff
- 2. Continuing contribution to the national effort and strategy to fight the spread of COVID-19:** the level of travel and inter-household contact that would be involved is far beyond that currently permitted to the general population; we do not yet know what the rules for the general population will be from 29 June onwards, but it is possible that the increased operation of schools will be significantly out-of-step with the rules; there are particular concerns from the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board area as cases appear to be on the increase there
- 3. Having the confidence of parents, staff and students – based on evidence and information – so that they can plan ahead:** staff are feeling anything but confident about the proposed return, and the absence of detailed information as yet is making it difficult for them to plan
- 4. Ability to prioritise learners at key points, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds:** schools' ability to prioritise key learners (e.g. Years 6, 10 and 12) has been significantly compromised by the requirement to offer a return to all year groups
- 5. Consistency with the Welsh Government's framework for decision making, to have guidance in place to support measures such as distancing, managing attendance and wider protective actions.**

Our members will, no doubt, do their best to create a welcoming and supportive atmosphere, whilst ensuring an environment that is as safe as possible for everyone – but it will be an enormous challenge and the risks will be high. There are likely to be consequences in terms of levels of anxiety and impact on mental health.

We urgently need assurances from Welsh Government about the following issues:

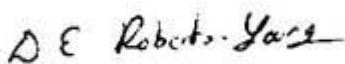
- provision of PPE and guidance as to its use
- sufficiency of cleaning services and products
- testing of staff and pupils
- that clarity is provided in terms of expectations in relation to Special Schools

- that local authorities assume immediate responsibility for hubs and that teachers and school leaders get their statutory holiday entitlement over the summer before facing the challenging school year ahead
- that individual staff members' circumstances are taken into account in deciding who provides and delivers distance learning and who is required for face-to-face contact in schools
- that safe transport arrangements are in place, and that no category of learners will be discriminated against on the basis of lack of safe transport, or lack of transport altogether
- that guidance is provided in relation to learners with Additional Learning Needs, particularly those who normally have one-to-one support
- that arrangements are in place for reducing the operation of schools, or for closure due to lack of staff or an increase in infection rates
- that clarity on any modifications to course content/assessment requirements for the current Years 10 and 12 will be available as soon as possible
- that clarity is provided about the responsibility for extra costs; schools need clarity and certainty about their own budgets

As we prepare to send this letter, news is emerging of a change of plan in terms of school reopening for all pupils in England before the summer. We urge you to take into account the genuine concerns and fears here in Wales and ask you to stay true to your 5 key principles and consider reviewing the decision.

We look forward to receiving your response to these pressing matters, and note that we would be available to meet online to discuss these issues further.

Yours faithfully,



Dilwyn Roberts-Young
Is-ysgrifennydd Cyffredinol/General Secretary



Rebecca Williams
Is-ysgrifennydd Cyffredinol/Deputy General Secretary