

Joint union letter – 13 May 2021

Face coverings in secondary schools and colleges in England

Dear colleague

We are writing following the announcement this week by the Prime Minister on the relaxation of recommendations on wearing of face coverings in schools and colleges. The joint unions were disappointed at the Government decision as we believe it is premature and risky, however we now want to work with education leaders.

In the lead up to this announcement we joined with leading scientists and parent groups to [call on Government](#) to keep the current face coverings arrangements in place beyond May 17th with a further review at stage 4 of the lockdown roadmap on 21 June.

For the following reasons, there is a strong case for continuing with the current arrangements and we would therefore recommend that schools and colleges use the flexibility within the new DfE guidance to actively encourage students and staff in secondary schools and colleges to continue wearing face coverings in classrooms and communal areas – subject to review in the run up to the next step on the national roadmap from 21 June. We would encourage leaders to have discussions with staff and seek to address the understandable concerns that they may have. Nobody, whether staff or student, in any part of a primary or secondary school or college, should be prevented from wearing a face covering if they wish to do so.

SAGE Advice

Since the publication of our letter, it has become clear that the Government's own SAGE committee had also [advised ministers](#) to keep the face covering recommendation in place beyond 17th May.

Threat from variants

We are aware that cases of the B.1.617.2 variant, which is linked to the exponential growth of the pandemic across India and nearby regions, are now being found across England and that this has been identified as a variant of concern in the UK. Cases of this variant, where there is no link to travel or surge testing, are doubling week on week.^{1 2} Of greatest concern, several outbreaks have happened in schools,^{3 4 5 6} including secondary schools,⁷ and have potentially contributed to community spread. For example, we understand cases have risen rapidly among school age children in Bolton within a week. With spread clearly occurring within schools and into the community all across England, it is best to take preventative action now. Despite several requests, the Government has refused to provide us with aggregate data on the total number of variant cases linked to schools.

Risks of Long Covid to pupils

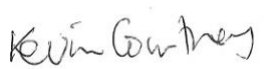
We also know from ONS data that 10% of primary school age children and 13% of secondary school age children have persistent symptoms even 5 weeks after the initial infection.⁸ Between 7-8% have symptoms that persist for at least 12 weeks. Scientists have estimated there are 43,000 children, and 114,000 teaching and educational staff living with long COVID, a syndrome whose impact on children and adults long-term is poorly understood.⁹ The ONS data indicates that two-thirds of people with long COVID have some degree of limitation in activity,¹⁰ suggesting that the condition has important impacts on people's day to day lives.

Face coverings still required in shops and transport

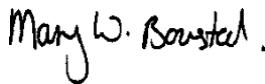
Face masks are still required in other indoor spaces like shops, restaurants, cinemas and transport including dedicated school transport. Schools and colleges should not be stripped of this protection where, despite the best efforts of education leaders, social distancing is near impossible.

We hope you find this letter constructive. We are totally committed to working with you to keep pupils and staff safe and to avoid more children losing out on face-to-face education as result of virus outbreaks. The key lesson of the last twelve months is that we need to take a precautionary approach, particularly when it comes to safeguarding the health, wellbeing and education of pupils.

Yours sincerely



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joint NEU general
secretary



Dr Mary Boustead –
joint NEU general
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officer



Dr Patrick Roach –
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UNISON national
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¹ England PH. SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern and variants under investigation in England: Technical briefing 10, 2021.

² <https://covid19.sanger.ac.uk/lineages/raw>.

³ First cases of Indian variant Covid-19 found in Leicester. Leicester News. 28 April 2021.

⁴ Covid: Mutation of UK variant found in Telford and Wrekin schools. BBC News. 2021.

⁵ McKeon C. 'Complacency' warning given to Sefton people as covid cases have doubled in a week. ECHO News; 2021. <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/complacency-warning-given-sefton-people-20564326.amp>

⁶ Indian Covid 'variant of concern' found in education settings in Bedford. Bedfordshire Live News. 2021.

⁷ Davis N. New concerns as Indian Covid variant clusters found across England. The Guardian. 2021.

⁸ Statistics ONS. Prevalence of ongoing symptoms following coronavirus (COVID-19) infection in the UK: 1 April 2021

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