

School support staff survey on the wider opening of schools (England)

UNISON has always been clear that we want to see children returning to school. We all know how valuable regular attendance at school is, particularly for the most vulnerable children. However, our view is that schools should only increase pupil numbers when it is safe to do so [based on the principles and tests we have set out](#) along with other education unions. The principles and tests include:

- 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

Following the announcement from the Prime Minister on 10 May that the government were planning for schools to open more widely from 1 June, UNISON emailed a short survey to support staff members working in school and early years settings to gauge their reaction. The survey was emailed to members for whom we have permission on 12 May, followed up with a reminder on 15 May. There were 45,275 responses.

A summary of the results is given below.

Type of setting

- 70% Primary
- 16% Secondary
- 10% Special and PRU
- 4% Early years

Main role

- 63% Teaching assistants / learning support assistants
- 9% Admin and management
- 4% Nursery nurses
- 2% Technicians
- 2% Cover supervisor
- 2% Behaviour management
- 2% Learning mentors
- 2% Midday supervisors
- 2% Site / facilities staff
- 1% Cleaner
- 1% Family support advisors
- 10% Other

Current working pattern

- **3%** in school full time
- **58%** on rota
- **21%** working solely at home
- **18%** at home but can't perform their role

Views on safety

- **98%** were NOT reassured by the Prime Minister's speech on 10 May that schools would be safe if pupil numbers increased from 1 June
- **96%** do NOT think the government has put safety first in developing its plan – comments mainly about the economy being the priority
- **Less than 1%** are not concerned and think pupils and staff will be safe
- **6%** are a little concerned but believe schools will still be ok to increase numbers from 1 June
- **64%** are very concerned and don't believe pupils and staff will be safe
- **30%** are losing sleep and/or suffering high anxiety as a result of the planned increase in numbers from 1st June

- **4%** say schools have adequate PPE
- **23%** are confident their school has the staff resources and expertise to ensure all health and safety measures and risk assessments are in place
- **95%** of those who were also parents of school aged children would not be confident safe to send their own children back to school on 1 June
- **72%** think the government need to do more to protect vulnerable children during lockdown
- **39%** of school business professionals/cleaners/caretakers said their school was experiencing a shortage of cleaning products
- **49%** of school business professionals/cleaners/caretakers have noticed an increase in price of cleaning products from suppliers
- **75%** prepared to take part in action alongside parents to protect the health and safety of pupils and staff if government insist on moving ahead with an unsafe reopening of schools and early years settings

School support staff have played a key role in keeping schools open during this pandemic, with 61% attending the workplace in some capacity (including during school holidays and bank holidays) and 21% working from home. However, support staff surveyed are hugely anxious about the government's plans to increase pupil numbers from 1 June and we continue to oppose this unsafe proposal.

The Prime Minister stated in his speech on 10 May that the government will *"be driven not by mere hope or economic necessity"* but by *"the science, the data and public health"*. At this time, there is no consensus amongst the scientific community about the transmission of the virus between children. No data has yet been published about the risks of the virus to school support staff, whose demographic profile is very different to teachers. For UNISON the health and safety of pupils and school staff is absolutely paramount. Scientific evidence is yet to be released that establishes that the measures contained with the DfE guidance are capable of ensuring the risk to pupils, staff and the wider community is reduced as far as possible.

We therefore reiterate our call to government to work with us to achieve the shared aim of returning children to school without focusing on the arbitrary date of 1 June, which is putting immense strain on the whole school community. Instead, we can put the right processes and procedures in place to allow schools to be confident that risks have been minimized as far as possible, [in line with the principles and tests we have set out](#), and work together for a safer wider opening of schools.