

To: All teaching unions  
in Wales

Via email only

06 July 2020

Dear colleague,

As we go into the traditional summer holiday period we face continuing uncertainty about the operations of schools, colleges and other education settings in the autumn term. Children have already been profoundly impacted by our national response to the pandemic and with the summer period looming there is a risk that the detailed planning needed for autumn may be delayed.

I am deeply concerned about the risk of such a delay. Within scientific guidelines, we must seek to maximize the opportunities children have to experience their human rights, including their rights to an education and to be safe. I have written to the Government on this issue today, to urge greater clarity of expectation as a matter of urgency, but teaching unions also have an important role to play.

Unions must keep the health and safety of their members at the forefront of considerations. But unions must also ensure that their members feel supported and enabled to perform their professional role to the best of their ability. With this in mind I am calling for all education unions in Wales to:

- ensure that planning progresses over the summer months so that settings are ready to return to the fullest extent possible on the first day of term;
- ensure their members' professional role in educating children is prioritised. There has been much focus nationally on operational matters and it is essential that education itself is no longer sidelined;
- ensure that they support their members to engage with learners at home using the full range of tools on the national learning platform Hwb, including video-conferencing facilities.

This pandemic has illustrated what we already knew, which is that education professionals are essential for children to access their human rights. The work of union members in Wales goes beyond enabling access to educational rights, and also helps ensure the rest of children's rights, including those to be safe, healthy, to play and to participate in their community.



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Indeed, many education professionals have been in contact with my office over the last months to express their concerns about the impact of school closures on children and to share their views about the necessity to re-engage with children in school settings.

I have publically applauded the response of the education profession to the initial impact of the pandemic, during which school leaders re-purposed schools and ensured the most vulnerable were supported. But the last two months have shown that decisions about school re-opening have not been straightforward, leading me to publically express my concern that disputes about contractual arrangements were a barrier to enabling the four week return that was initially communicated to families and children.

There are also ongoing challenges in ensuring adequate support for home learning. The Coronavirus and Me consultation led by my office surveyed over 23,000 children and young people and showed that half of secondary aged pupils were worried about falling behind and many were requesting more live-streaming and video content to help them with their education. I am concerned that union advice appears to have dissuaded some professionals from live-streaming on safeguarding grounds that I believe are unwarranted given safeguarding features of Hwb.

As the pandemic progresses we must acknowledge that a degree of uncertainty about the future will persist and that across all sectors we need to work flexibly and responsively. With this in mind, I urge each of the education unions in Wales to work to find solutions so that opportunities for children to experience their human rights are maximized.

The summer holiday period must not be wasted time. Of course, professionals deserve a well-earned break but our schools must be ready to give children the fullest experience of education on the first week of term. Children have already missed out and we cannot predict with certainty the situation in winter, when further closures may be necessary. Schools need to be open to the maximum extent and professionals also need to be using the full range of available tools to support home learning.

The nation rallied round to provide the health sector response we needed and we must now have the same response to education. As in other sectors, our educational professionals need to adapt rapidly and work differently in these exceptional times. I know that education in Wales is full of dedicated and innovative professionals who play a vitally important role in the lives of children. These professionals must be supported by their unions to do this to the fullest extent of their ability as this is urgently needed by our children and young people in Wales.

Yours sincerely,



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