

UsforThem
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The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP, the Secretary of State for Education
20 Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT

25 June 2020

Dear Mr Williamson,

Working together to ensure the welfare of our children

We welcome the statement you made on 19th June announcing your intention to get all schools back in September, and the report, if correct, which was leaked in last night's Telegraph that you're about to announce dropping social distancing in schools. As you may be aware from the media coverage of the UsforThem campaign both here and in Scotland, we've been urging Government to get children in all year groups back to school urgently, normally and without social distancing.

We also welcome the announcement made by the Prime Minister on 23 June about the relaxation of the lockdown for the general public. However, we note that this announcement made no reference to schools, and we are aware that you'll be releasing further Guidance to schools in the coming days.

Mr Williamson, we are writing to ask that in making your decision concerning schools and in developing your Guidance, that the welfare of children must be your primary consideration. Whether or not social distancing for kids was an acceptable emergency measure at the start of the pandemic, it is not now. There is a growing body of evidence^{1 2 3} demonstrating the harm social distancing causes to children (including the open letters from Ellen Townsend, the RCPCH and Sunil Bhopal). We would urge you to read these in full, if you haven't already, as they leave little room for doubt. Those letters reinforce our own instincts, as parents, stated in our open letter to you dated 28 May 2020, that isolation, school closures and social distancing each have a devastating effect on children that will disproportionately affect vulnerable children and those with special educational needs and is disproportionate to the risks associated with COVID-19. The harm caused by social distancing adversely affects all children and must be weighed against any marginal benefit to be gained in terms of infection control.

We believe the weight of evidence and expert opinion compels you, on scientific, legal and moral grounds, to drop social distancing for children and we call on you to now do that. We have written separately to your department's senior advisors to Ms. Inne-Taylor and Mr. Rahman asking

¹ Crawley E, Loades M, Feder G, et al. Wider collateral damage to children in the UK because of the social distancing measures designed to reduce the impact of COVID-19 in adults. *BMJ Paediatrics Open* 2020;4:e000701. doi:10.1136/bmjpo-2020-000701

² Orben. A, Tomova. L., Blakemore, SJ. The effects of social deprivation on adolescent development and mental health *Lancet Child Adolesc Health* 2020 June 12, 2020 [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642\(20\)30186-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(20)30186-3)

³ Loades et al. Rapid Systematic Review: The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of COVID-19. In press <https://els-jbs-prod-cdn.jbs.elsevierhealth.com/pb/assets/raw/Health%20Advance/journals/jaac/aip.pdf>

the same. We are in addition and as mentioned in our letter to Ms. Inne-Taylor and Mr. Rahman in receipt of a significant number of distressing stories from parents, and in particular parents of vulnerable and SEN children, who are distraught about the impact of existing measures on their children and who are urging us to consider all options, including legal options, to hasten an end to distancing in schools.

We enclose on a confidential basis a copy of an unsigned, undated pre-action protocol letter which has been prepared by our lawyers as a contingency. We had originally anticipated serving this letter, and although all of the concerns set out in the letter remain, we now have some cause for hope that the Government is working towards a more directive policy to require schools to reopen, and hopefully we will therefore be able to avert taking a more formal legal course of action. However, we are prepared to pursue such a course if the need to do so persists. If it is helpful for you to do so we would also be happy for this letter to be disclosed to the teaching unions on a confidential basis. We are sharing this with you only so that you are able to understand the very serious issues at stake. Legal action is not our aim but for our 9,000+ members we cannot stand by while critical policy decisions affecting the lives of a generation of children are made without appropriate priority for the needs and best interests of those children or worse still the subordination of their interests to those of other, more vocal groups.

There is an urgent need to provide prescriptive instructions to Schools and LAs that require the full reopening of schools for all pupils in all year groups as soon as possible and without social distancing between children. Deferring all risk assessments to local authorities, schools and teachers themselves is resulting in huge inconsistency of approach, far too much uncertainty, and is resulting in radically different approaches being taken in different areas.

We look forward to hearing from you and, we hope, working with rather than against you to find a safe and sensible solution.

Kind regards

Molly Kingsley,
On behalf of

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