

Wales TUC – briefing

“Everyone wants to support our school communities but there was a general feeling that this should not be at the expense of the well-being of staff, because ultimately it is the children in school who are then affected when staff morale deteriorates.”

Union member

Background

All the education trade unions are in agreement with the Welsh Government that continued learning in school should be a priority. However, we believe that the mitigation measures should continue to be in place in our schools to help keep learners and staff safe from contracting COVID-19. If we fail to put protection for everyone in place now, we will continue to see unmanageable levels of staff and pupil absence, which could lead to long-term issues.

In July 2021, the Welsh Government began to consult with education trade unions and other stakeholders on a Local COVID-19 infection control decision making framework¹.

The guiding principles of the framework are to:

- enable schools to operate as ‘business as usual’ as far as possible including the provision of free breakfast and after school clubs, extra-curricular activities and practical subjects
- secure the best outcomes for all learners by considering both their educational needs and wellbeing
- manage ongoing risks of COVID-19 as safely as possible and ensure clarity of actions required if there is a case in a school
- manage mitigations on a local basis dependent upon the prevalence of COVID-19 cases.

During the consultation process, TUs raised various concerns about the framework. At the time when schools were just about to close for the summer break, cases in schools were once again rising.

Given that in July no-one had any idea what impact the six weeks holidays would have on COVID-19 rates, the unions urged caution in removing a great many mitigation measures that were in place in the former Operational Guidance for schools.

¹ <https://gov.wales/local-covid-19-infection-control-decision-framework-schools-autumn-2021-html>

Unions largely agreed that a return to school on the existing guidance would allow local health officials to assess the rates of COVID-19 in communities and still implement mitigation measures for schools to stay open.

The Welsh Government, given that the national alert level had changed to 0, was clear that the new framework, promoting a business as usual approach provided proportionate guidance for schools for September.

Context for schools

As of 24 September, national attendance rates stand at 85% with 18,478 learners absent through COVID-19 related issues. Year 11 attendance stands at 79%.

Around 10 days after schools reopened, **NAHT Cymru** carried out a snap poll of members which revealed the following:

83% of respondents felt the difference between schools advice on self-isolation and the public advice on self-isolation (public told to work from home and avoid crowded indoor spaces) was unfair

63% had received advice from TTP that contradicted the framework guidance

68% did not agree with the policy on self-isolation in relation to household contacts

Out of 344 schools that responded, there were 1,139 positive cases in less than two weeks, 1,038 were learners and 101 were staff. A further 315 staff were self-isolating and 1,038 learners.

Figures obtained from LAs across Wales revealed the following number of cases in schools:

768 in **Swansea** from September 6-17

637 in **Cardiff** from September 13-19

141 in **Ceredigion** from September 13-17

230 in **Newport** from September 3-17

Vale of Glamorgan – 12 schools have more than 10 cases, with up to 9% of children off in one school – over 100 children.

Carmarthenshire – an average of 40 staff a week have been absent as they had to isolate, from the start of term

Caerphilly – Total of 935 (834 learners - 3.1%, 101 staff) confirmed cases of the virus in schools and settings in Caerphilly since the start of term. 86% of schools affected by COVID-19 since start of term, some supported to close.. The numbers of learners and staff affected has grown steadily during last week September 20-25 (Monday total cases 557, Friday total cases 935)

RCT – 296 teaching and support staff off on September 22 with positive PCR (112), awaiting PCR (109) or due to childcare pressures due to COVID-19 (75)

Schools in **Cardiff, Denbighshire, Swansea** and **RCT** are at High Alert

Attendance data for exam groups gathered from **ASCL Cymru** members. These ranged from 40% to 84% of those who responded. Where attendance was in the 80%+, the members stated that these were low for their school setting.

Figures released by **Swansea Bay University Health Board** on September 29 show that the number of children being admitted to hospital with COVID-19 has increased dramatically in the region.

Almost as many children aged 15 and under have been in hospital with COVID-19 in Swansea Bay over the last three months compared with the whole of the rest of the pandemic.

So far, 93 children in **Swansea** and **Neath Port Talbot** have been ill enough to need inpatient treatment for Covid-19 since the pandemic began in March, 2020. But almost half of those, 45, have been admitted this July, August and up to September 24.

UNISON remains of the opinion that re-introducing face coverings is a positive message and form of mitigation.

The union recently surveyed 1250 teaching assistants, administrators, caterers, cleaners, lunchtime supervisors, maintenance workers and technicians.

- 61% said that they felt safer wearing face coverings in work
- 57% felt that wearing them in secondary school settings is an important safety measure
- 48% would be worried if face coverings were removed

A recent study in America shows evidence that there are more COVID-19 cases in areas without school face mask policies.

The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention released three studies ² that highlight the importance of using layered prevention strategies including universal masking to

² <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2021/p0924-school-masking.html>

stop the spread and minimise disruptions to school operations for safe in-person education.

These studies found that school districts without a universal masking policy in place were more likely to have COVID-19 outbreaks.

Nationwide, counties without masking requirements saw the number of paediatric COVID-19 cases increase nearly twice as quickly during this same period.

Anecdotal evidence from schools revealed the following problems across Wales:

“Staff in general feel ‘exhausted’ already and concerns were expressed about the low levels of staff morale and well-being due to the need to cover absent staff as well as being expected to carry on as normal with workload demands when life in school is stressful and far from normal.” Union member

“I’m a headteacher, I’m so short staffed today I stepped in to teach, I covered for the lunchtime supervisor and I opened and closed up because our caretaker is off.” Non-teaching school leader in a South Wales primary

- Increase in staff absence due to COVID-19 or caring responsibilities
- Increase in cases amongst learners
- Increased anxiety among learners
- Increased concern at exams running in the summer since so much learning has now been lost.
- Confusion and contradictory advice being given from TTP e.g. Some LHBs advising household contact to self-isolate and others not; some advising parents to ask schools for advice on whether to keep household contacts home; schools not hearing from TTP at all in relation to positive cases with others not hearing for many days; confusion over when to send out ‘warn and inform’ letters; schools being asked to provide details of close contacts for multiple cases including who the children sat next to at lunch, played with at break time; Heads being contacted during the evenings and weekends to provide information on a large number of close contacts; misinformation or no information given to Heads.
- Learning continuity compromised
- **RCT** council reported issues with school transport – bus driver shortages

- Pressure on testing centres in certain areas led to LAs changing the messaging to parents on when to go for tests to alleviate pressure on the system
- Concerns over lack of supply teachers and Welsh medium in particular, as well as funding to cover staff absence
- Class/school closures due to lack of staff
- Classes merged with no specialist teacher available
- Whilst in crisis management, pre-pandemic accountability measures still insisted upon in some areas
- Leaders reporting that this term has been the worst they have had to manage than at any time throughout the pandemic.
- Supply teachers are reluctant to go into school and get ill. They do not receive pay when they are off sick. How can we support them better?
- Some children are nervous and fearful about being in school at the moment and perhaps we should consider how best to address these concerns.

“The only real mitigation that currently operates in school is that symptomatic children stay home. Staff feel that this is not always being implemented, as there are children in school who are symptomatic. It is PCR tests that are required for symptomatic children and not lateral flow.” Union Representative

Key asks

Framework and mitigations

- To review the current framework risk levels and mitigation measures to determine whether more stringent measures are needed to maintain the continuity of education e.g. grouping of learners, staggered session times, isolating contacts, mask wearing
- Produce clear guidance on expectations for schools to support learners at home due to self-isolation or class/school closures
- Produce clear guidance for schools on the use of CO2 monitors and produce a clear strategy on how to deal with issues of poor ventilation when they arise. This should include funding set aside to address any significant issues identified.

- Removing the phrase 'business as usual' from the framework to more accurately reflect the situation in schools
- To support schools in giving a consistent message to the public that does not put schools in conflict with parents

Funding

- To clearly commit funding COVID-19 related staff absence, including cover for staff with caring responsibilities, staff who are 28 weeks pregnant and staff who need to self-isolate
- Fund all measures needed to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 – including any works to ensure windows can be opened, HEPA filters etc, based on individual risk assessments

TTP

- To increase capacity in the TTP system so schools have sufficient levels of support
- To review all TTP guidance and approached to supporting schools and bringing consistency to the system across all LHBs