



Listening to schools,
Shaping the National Agenda

Medicine in Specialist Schools steering group
c/o Special Schools Voice
New Bridge Academies Trust
Roman Road
Oldham

16th March 2020

To: Rt Hon Gavin Williamson – Secretary of State for Education

Cc: Rt Hon Matt Hancock - Secretary of State for Health
Rt Hon Robert Halfon – Chair of the Education Select Committee, House of Commons
Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt - Chair of the Health Select Committee, House of Commons
Emma Hardy MP – Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for SEND

Dear Mr Williamson,

We write as the regional representatives of the Medicine in Specialist Steering Group, formed in January this year to represent children with complex health care needs who attend specialist schools, their parents/carers and staff who support them at school. We have been seeking to draw the attention of the Departments of Health and Education to the level of clinical need and risk now being managed in specialist schools by unqualified school staff, and the need for government guidance for commissioners and providers of school-based medical services for these most vulnerable children.

Now as the coronavirus (Covid 19) situation develops, we have written to Public Health England to request that specific guidance should be issued for the care of these children in special schools and other settings and to provide clinical risk management from qualified nurses. A further risk factor for these children is the fact that they are generally transported to and from school for 30-60 minutes each way on local authority minibuss transport or taxis, which exposes these children daily to additional risk in the context of coronavirus.

We recognise that the rapidly evolving national strategy is seeking to balance competing needs across sectors of the population, and that schools generally must follow the advice of Public Health officials and the Department for Education. However, we wish to draw your attention to the extreme vulnerability of this cohort of approx. 30-40,000 children, who have complex health and care needs, often with multiple NHS care plans, and for whom there is an elevated risk of mortality compared to their age cohort who do not have additional medical complications.

It is our belief that whilst the general population of school students may be at low risk whilst the level of transmission in the community multiplies, this sub-group are exceptionally vulnerable, and therefore require a planned intervention to 'shield' them from risk as far as is possible, until the 'herd immunity' point is reached in due course. One clear way this could be achieved would be to close special schools that have vulnerable pupils with medical conditions (approx. 500 schools across England have substantial concentrations of these children), as a precautionary move to ensure that their families can make the safest arrangements to protect them from exposure to the coronavirus, and to avoid hospital admissions. Alternatively, headteachers could respond to an instruction to





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identify the children with elevated risk, based on a set of agreed characteristics, which are specified in an assessment known as 'The West Sussex Tool', so that their parents could be instructed to self – isolate these children at home. Local authorities, NHS trusts and multi-academy trusts could identify which schools are in this category within 24 hours of clear guidance being issued, to enable headteachers to make local decisions for safeguarding.

There is currently no clear advice emerging from government about this vulnerable group; it is notable that special schools in Northern Ireland have closed to children as a protective measure from today (as reported by BBC Northern Ireland) without waiting for direction from ministers. The Dixons academy chain in Bradford has issued guidance to parents that is more stringent than is currently being followed in special schools: *"We are advising parents of pupils with chronic respiratory or immunodeficiency conditions to consult a doctor about whether it is safe for their child to attend school. The current advice from Public Health England remains that other pupils and staff can attend school as normal"*. <https://www.dixonsat.com/news-events/news/coronavirus>

We request that you use your influence and authority to act swiftly to safeguard these vulnerable children. Provide guidance to allow Head Teacher's in special schools to make local decisions for partial closure or full closure to protect vulnerable children in these fast moving times as we plan to combat the impact of the Covid 19 coronavirus.

Yours Sincerely,

Tina Harvey, Executive Headteacher, Perseid School, Merton
Sabrina Hobbs, Principal, Severndale school, Shrewsbury
Simon Knight, Joint Headteacher, Frank Wise School, Banbury
Graham Quinn, CEO, New Bridge Academies Trust, Oldham
Chris Rollings, Head Teacher, Hadrian School, Newcastle upon Tyne
Judith Smith, Executive Headteacher, Wellspring Academies Trust, Barnsley
Jo Stoaling, Head Teacher, Three Ways School, Bath
Dr Kim Taylor OBE, Executive Head Teacher, Spring Common Academy, Huntingdon
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