

The latest news and announcements from Derbyshire UNISON

School and college safety

UNISON joins other education unions in England to put the case for continuing use of face coverings by staff and children



Unions call on schools and colleges to retain masks

As further easing of lockdown happens in England, UNISON has joined with other education unions to call on schools and colleges to continue the policy of staff and pupils wearing masks after the government at Westminster scrapped it.

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Together with NASUWT, GMB, NEU and UNITE, the union says that there is a “strong case” for continuing with the current arrangements, and recommends that schools and colleges use the flexibility in the new guidance from the Department of Education to “actively encourage students and staff ... to continue wearing face coverings in classrooms and communal areas”. This would then be subject to review in the run up to the next step on the national roadmap out

of lockdown, from 21 June.

In a letter, the unions raise concern that cases of the B.1.617.2 variant - “linked to the exponential growth of the pandemic across India and nearby regions” - are now being found across England.

Cases of this variant, where there is no link to travel or surge testing, are doubling, week on week, with several outbreaks having happened in schools, with the potential to have contributed to community spread.

The letter also points out that ONS data shows that, of primary school age children who have caught COVID-19, 10% have persistent symptoms as long as five weeks after the initial infection, while the figure for secondary school age children is 13%.

Between 7-8% have symptoms that persist for at least 12 weeks. Scientists have estimated 43,000 children and 114,000 teaching and educational staff are currently living with long COVID.

Removing masks in schools and colleges would also be at odds with policy elsewhere, as people visiting shops, restaurants, cinemas and so on, and using public transport - including dedicated school buses - will still have to use face coverings.

UNISON national secretary for education, Jon Richards, said:

“The government’s scientific advisors called for face coverings be kept in school classrooms until the summer. Yet the government ignored this warning and ploughed ahead, removing the face-covering recommendation despite the increase in new variants.

“No one wants to see face coverings used longer than needed, but to remove them now is too soon and too risky. That is why UNISON is urging schools to continue to wear face coverings in classrooms and communal areas.”

Mr Richards concluded:

“One key lesson of the last 12 months is that we need to take a precautionary approach to safeguarding the health, wellbeing and education of pupils.”

