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SENT VIA E-MAIL sec-of-state.ps@education.gov.uk

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
Westminster
LONDON
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Dear Secretary of State

Thank you for your letter of 31 December 2020 setting out changes to the start of the spring term for schools and colleges. We share your Department's concerns about the rapid changes in the path of the epidemic, particularly as rates in Birmingham are currently 358/100k and rising.

Of equal concern is the rise in rates in the 5 to 9 age group which have increased from 93/100k on the 7 December to 174/100k on the 27 December. Similarly in the 10 to 14 age group rates have increased from 208/100k to 281/100k over the same period.

Although these rates are below our working age population we are now seeing rises in these age groups in a pattern we did not see in November. Therefore the data suggests a more cautious approach to the opening of primary schools, special schools and alternative provision would be wise.

We agree that regular attendance at school is vital for children's education and wellbeing. At the end of the autumn term, attendance at Birmingham schools was above the national average which was due to the commitment of our schools staff in ensuring disruption to children's learning was minimised.

The last minute policy changes by your Department throughout this pandemic have had a real impact on the wellbeing of dedicated education professionals and the festive period has been no exception. Information about mass testing was provided right at the end of term, special school leaders were provided with policy documents late on New Year's Eve and secondary schools have been expected to work over this weekend to access IT equipment for vulnerable children.

The new strain of the virus and the rising case levels in the city mean that we are deeply concerned about the return of children to primary schools, special schools and alternative provision next week. We are urging your Department to reconsider your position around face to face learning in Birmingham and other areas subject to Tier 4 restrictions, as you did yesterday for London. The impact of the festive relaxation of restrictions is still unknown, teachers have not been told when they will be immunised and mass testing in schools is not yet in place. We will support any Birmingham school leader who assesses that it is not safe to open their school following a risk assessment, particularly where there is a shortage of available staff.

The contribution made by education professionals to this country's response to the pandemic has been exceptional. These staff deserve the trust and support of your Department to be able to do their jobs in the most challenging of circumstances.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ian Ward', written in a cursive style.

Councillor Ian Ward
Leader of Birmingham City Council

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jayne Francis', written in a cursive style.

Councillor Jayne Francis
Cabinet Member for Education, Skills & Culture