Dear Mr Mangnall,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Board of Governors at The Grove School in your Totnes constituency to highlight what we feel is an unsatisfactory situation brought about by the Government’s current guidance for schools and parents during this latest coronavirus lockdown. This guidance does not go far enough to support schools in their duty of care, nor does it significantly reduce transmission of the virus in our community.

The latest lockdown was announced on the evening of Monday 4th January, after a two week Christmas break leaving schools having to either change their plans after one day of normal schooling or, as in our case, having to undo the careful planning done on that Monday’s inset day and communicate it to parents hastily that evening. You will appreciate that this created a very stressful and uncertain first day of term for teachers, parents and most importantly the children.

The guidance issued in support of this lockdown to schools and parents sets expectations which cannot be met if we are expected to accept on-site all children who have one key worker parent. 90% of our 324 children qualify to attend school following this guidance, meaning when combined with the staff required to support those children we would have around 330 people on site. I hope you can see how, even when classes operate as ‘bubbles’ this does not support the stay at home message issued to us in each of the daily Government briefings to stop transmission of the virus.

As a result we have had to implement our own local level criteria for attendance to allow for vulnerable children and those whose parents are both critical workers. This follows the advice issued in March and our risk assessment, but it is disappointing and frustrating that schools have been put in this isolated position. We are by no means the only one. This has reduced our attendance to 40%, but the result of this has been that …

* pupils are receiving different educational experiences, and as the Government issued fewer closure notices to businesses, and businesses have adapted to home working, this risks being worse for children than from March to June last year;
* many more parents think their child/children deserve a place in school due to the raised expectations in the guidance. Something which I am sad to say is causing teachers to face aggressive and abusive direct contact from parents on a daily basis;
* this psychological stress for teachers has been caused in no small part by the Secretary of State for Education instructing parents that they should complain to schools, a message he has repeated this week – this is incredibly damaging and unsupportive;
* teachers now have additional work to do to support in-school and at home children, increasing their working hours and stress levels which working in what feels like a crowded workplace given the severity of the pandemic – the wellbeing of these teachers is a big concern

We would ask that, considering the above, you ensure that these issues are represented and discussed appropriately so that there is increased support for schools and teachers as they continue to be front line workers during this current lockdown. Actions we would be encouraged to see are …

* guidance from Government on maximum class sizes and on-site attendance, as there was in March;
* a review of the job roles which make up key workers currently in England;
* support for employers so that they are able to offer parents blended working, at no cost to the parent, allowing time off to adequately support home schooling;
* asking the Department for Education to look closely at the involvement and support that Local Authorities are giving to schools – this varies nationally, and regrettably Devon County Council have offered little in the way of support or contact to their employees, the teaching staff;
* opening a constructive dialogue with teaching unions, and teaching staff, to help shape future guidance on school closures and reopening;
* increased clarity from PHE on what to do where there are cases in schools, as this also seems to vary when contacted by Headteachers

I look forward to hearing from you on how you feel the situation for schools can be improved so they can be adequately supported to do they bit to keep our community safe.

Yours sincerely,

Ian Stewart

Chair of Governors, The Grove School