50/50 in school campaign group

20 July 2020

Introduction

We are grateful to have the opportunity to submit our thoughts and concerns to the Parliament’s Education and Skills Committee. We have already e-mailed Committee members in June and July about the views of the 50/50 campaign and our serious concerns about the Scottish Government’s previous plans for a safe return to school on 11 or 12 August.

We have also emailed the Committee asking why there was no meeting of the Committee earlier in July. This might have allowed more time for questions to be asked and for solutions to be found to problems that may have arisen in these intervening weeks.

Background

The 50/50 Campaign was formed in mid-June by a group of parents with school age children from different parts of Scotland. We were all united in our concerns about the Scottish Government plans for ‘blended learning’ as the main plan for the return to school in August. The group felt that in the absence of clear, comprehensive and national guidelines for at-home and online learning and with no guarantees of a minimum number of days in school; there was real cause for concern about the quality of education our children might receive and also about the levels of support that might be available to pupils who had been absent from school for almost 5 months by the time schools return. The group developed a clear set of five asks covering a guaranteed amount of time in-school from 11/12 August; a national minimum standard for at home and online learning, including number of contact hours with a teacher; an emphasis on physical and emotional well-being and mental health; support for pupils who may have fallen behind or have additional learning needs and extra support for pupils entering key transition school years.

We have been very encouraged by the response to our asks by MSPs and councillors across the political spectrum and also by parents, carers and interested bodies. We held an online Q&A with members of this Committee, chaired by Jackie Brock, Chief Executive of Children in Scotland. We were delighted that MSPs from each political party on the Education and Skills Committee took part and that we managed to attract so many parents/carers to participate on the evening; especially as it followed the announcement by John Swinney that his intention was for schools to return full time on 11/12 August.

New Scottish Government Guidance - 50/50 Campaign reaction

We are somewhat encouraged by Scottish Government assurances that schools will return full time on 11/12 August. However, we still don’t know what progress has actually been made to achieve this. We are sure that schools/teachers/management teams and non-teaching staff have been doing their absolute best, in between taking some much-needed time off, to organise things to make this possible. But nothing has been published, that we are aware of, to reassure parents and carers that any of
this is possible. We are still concerned at the continued lack of clarity and the information vacuum about what is actually happening to make sure there can be a safe, full time return to school at this time.

We welcomed the guidance published by the Scottish Government on 16 July, but it has done little to alleviate these concerns and once again, presented more questions than answers. While it is good to have Government guidance for returning to school, it is important to note that education staff are and have been on holiday and will potentially have just two in-service days to prepare before welcoming pupils back from an absence that directly or indirectly, may have been traumatic for them.

The 50/50 campaign is disappointed that four out of our five asks have not been reflected adequately in the updated guidance and sincerely hope this is merely a first step in preparing for the return to nursery and school. As far as we can tell; the guidance makes no mention of a national online learning platform; how councils might use local buildings and spaces if required; any focus on physical and mental wellbeing and enhanced transition support for those pupils entering P1 and S1.

We have had concerns from the date the Scottish Government announced a 100% full time return to school in June given the many unanswered questions still being posed by the teaching unions. This situation needs to be resolved urgently and transparently. Stephen McCabe, Children’s Spokesperson for CoSLA and the joint chair of the Education Recovery Group has stated that the return of pupils full time in August is “absolutely not a done deal” as has Larry Flannagan of the EIS Union. Both have raised concerns about the safety and protection of teachers in any return to school full time. Parents and carers need transparency about the status of these discussions and on the scientific evidence that it is safe for pupils to return FT without social distancing (if this is indeed the case for all age groups, this still isn’t clear).

The 50/50 campaign has no desire to undermine public health protection and so we need to be able to trust in decisions taken on the back of clear scientific advice and for this advice to be in the public domain.

There are a number of issues that remain unclear and that require urgent answers:

- It will be very difficult for teachers to maintain the 2m distance from pupils either because classroom space won't allow it or around younger pupils who may be struggling with the concept of being away from their parents and so might need more support. Have councils outlined detailed plans for how they will achieve this?
- Have councils clearly set out how they intend to source and utilise PPE for teaching and non-teaching staff?
- Are detailed plans available about the resourcing of increased cleaning procedures in all schools?
- What testing will be available for school staff and senior pupils?
- We understand from the guidance that school transport will be considered as school estate – how will senior pupils and drivers be protected?
• Does the Scottish Government have clear ‘contingency’ plans for a national standardised online learning platform and for consistent at-home learning, should coronavirus cases rise, or we experience a second wave in Scotland? At home learning will also be needed from Day 1 of the schools return for those pupils who will be unable to return to school because of underlying health conditions of either themselves or family members. Blended learning will also be needed if there are unresolved issues to legitimate concerns being put by the teaching unions at the moment.

• What plans are being put in place to ensure the right to education is being fulfilled for children who are unable to attend school on the same timetable as their peers?

• There appears to be some disparity between John Swinney’s announcement on the 16th July and the guidance that was published that day. The first paragraph of the guidance says physical distancing won’t be necessary between primary pupils but isn’t crystal clear about secondary pupils. Which is it? Will physical distancing be required for any years of secondary school? If it is, what detailed plans have schools made to achieve this?

• If the Scottish Government is recommending that pupils maintain 2m physical distancing for some age groups, why has there been no definitive guidance around use of alternative learning spaces including local facilities (churches, community centres etc.)

• The guidance states that “Some aspects of school life should not be reintroduced straight away. We recommend incremental reintroduction of collective activities that cross classes and age groups, and of higher risk activities such as assemblies, choirs, drama, gym etc”. Have schools produced detailed plans for how and when they plan to reintroduce these activities?

• We are concerned that there will be limited community use of school buildings which could impact upon after school clubs and activity groups who use these. Many parents rely on these for childcare, do schools/local authorities have plans in place for these to be reintroduced?

• What resources are being provided to support the expansion of outdoor learning?

• The guidance recommends reducing movement of pupils around the school. This might be feasible at primary level but presents significant challenges at secondary level, particularly where subjects may require access to technical equipment e.g. science, drama, home economics. What subsequent guidance is being issued to ensure pupils don’t miss out?

• What procedures will be used if there are positive COVID19 tests found in any schools? Will a different procedure be followed depending on whether it is found amongst a pupil or an adult?

It is absolutely essential that the Scottish Government and all councils are open and transparent about their deliberations; the scientific advice and the detailed plans for pupils’ return. The trust of pupils, parents and carers, teachers and school staff are all dependent upon it.