

19 June 2020

National guidance issued by UNISON for teaching assistants being asked to cover for teachers

As more children and young people return to school, pressure is mounting on Head Teachers to be able to provide adequate staffing for smaller groups of children. With a limit of 15 children per class (or 'bubble') it is easy to see how the number of teachers needed might exceed the number available. UNISON has issued the following guidance. In addition, it is worth remembering that NYCC has agreed with the NJC guidance that staff 'acting up' should be paid at the grade appropriate to the role they are acting-up into and that requests to cover other roles should be voluntary.

We recognise how difficult the current situation is for schools and school leaders, often having to react to government pronouncements that they neither agree with nor have any notice of. However, extending the opening of schools to more children should not be done if adequate and fair staffing cannot be achieved.

Should teaching assistants/learning support assistants be leading classes where these are limited to 15 children max?

In primary schools, classes should have no more than 15 pupils per group and should be led by a teacher, supported by a teaching assistant where appropriate.

The [DfE guidance](#) says that if there are any shortages of teachers then teaching assistants can be *asked* to lead a group, working under the direction of a teacher. However, it goes on to state that such teaching assistants should be willing to do so and suitably experienced.

UNISON's position is that suitably experienced teaching assistants should only be asked to lead classes in situations known about in advance, for example where a teacher is working from home due to being in a vulnerable group, and where another teacher is not available. Further, suitably experienced teaching assistants are those whose job description already included this occasional responsibility, usually HLTAs (working at levels 4 and 5 according to the [NJC model job profiles](#)), and who are paid at the appropriate grade.

Where HLTAs are deployed to lead classes, they should be provided with sufficient time, within their contracted hours, in which to plan and prepare, including opportunities to liaise with class teachers. They too should be

supported by a teaching assistant. UNISON is clear that HLTAs should not be expected to lead classes on an indefinite basis, although we are also aware of the importance of protecting the integrity of each small class/bubble as much as possible in current circumstances. Any arrangement for an HLTA to lead a class should be reviewed and agreed with the staff member on at least a fortnightly basis.

What about cover for PPA time?

Under normal circumstances, schools are required to put additional staff into their timetable to ensure that teaching continues during PPA time. However, given the current circumstances and the importance of keeping bubbles/pods/small classes intact, it is important that additional staff do not enter the classroom. In order that PPA time is maintained, many schools are operating an adjusted timetable, for example closing classrooms to pupils for a day or afternoon a week and using this time for staff to take PPA and for the school to be deep cleaned. This is our preferred approach.

If an HLTA is being asked to cover PPA across different bubbles, they are advised to contact the branch immediately.

What about cover supervision?

Cover supervision may be needed for a teacher's short-term absence from the classroom where the absence was not known about in advance (for example to cover short-term sickness). Ideally, so as to protect the integrity of the small class/bubble, the allocated teaching assistant should provide this cover. To undertake cover supervision, TAs should have skills and knowledge of at least level 3 and be paid at the appropriate grade for this level (see the [NJC model job profiles](#)). In this situation there is no expectation that active teaching takes place. Rather, pupils should carry out a pre-prepared exercise under supervision. For more information see our [factsheet](#) on cover supervision. Schools should consider contingency arrangements for appropriate cover supervision.

What should members do if the use of teaching assistants in school is inappropriate?

Members are being advised to contact the branch. As much as UNISON understands the challenging circumstances in which schools are operating, it is not fair to staff or pupils if staff are being deployed inappropriately.