

UK government closes schools under sustained public pressure

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At the daily government coronavirus press briefing Wednesday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that schools across the UK would close from the end of Friday. Education Secretary Gavin Williamson, in an address to the House of Commons, said that schools will be closed “until further notice.”

Most schools were due to break for the Easter holidays in two weeks’ time, but schools in England, Wales and Scotland closed Friday afternoon. Schools in Northern Ireland will close from Monday. This followed increasing pressure from teachers, parents and unions to shut schools, after the government updated its guidance extending self-isolation to entire families when just one member is showing symptoms of coronavirus.

The move came after days of uncertainty, with some schools struggling to stay open. A public petition calling for the closure of schools and colleges reached nearly 680,000 signatures. The petition stated, “We would like the government to enforce this action due to the growing fear among parents and students that attend school.” The National Education Union (NEU) had also called for the closure of schools on public health grounds.

Schools had been struggling as a result of government inaction. Over the past weeks, schools have had to invest in cleaning products, with some shutting their doors due to suspected cases of COVID-19. Some had already temporarily closed to carry out deep cleans and were struggling to stay open, even in the short term till Friday’s official deadline. Since the change of government advice on Monday night, many schools had already taken the decision to close due to student attendance falling and the number of staff self-isolating.

The moment the virus hit Italy, British schools were alarmed by the possible spread of the virus from

students returning from ski trips in northern Italy. This led pupils being told to self-isolate if they showed any symptoms. Some schools closed to carry out deep cleans due to suspected cases, with schools nationally increasing spending on soap and enforcing strict hand washing. This was despite schools struggling financially for a decade due to government cuts in education funding.

Uncertainty is leaving schools still struggling and pupils in the dark about their future. Although most pupils are being sent home, some schools, with reduced staffing, will have to remain open to ensure “key workers” are able to continue working, rather than being at home to look after their children. Examples of key workers include NHS staff needed to combat the virus, police and delivery drivers needed to keep food and other critical supplies running. Also, certain “vulnerable children,” such as those with a social worker, would continue to go to school.

Williamson said, “I recognise that what schools will be doing in these circumstances will look very different to the normal state of affairs, and we’ll ensure leaders have the flexibility that they need to face this challenge. In order to allow schools and other settings to focus on this new operational model, and the support they can give to these young people, we are removing various duties.”

Educationalists have described this as simply providing “childcare” rather than a full education service.

Key examinations are to be cancelled. This affects SATs, taken when children are aged 6-7 and 10-11, GCSEs, AS- and A-Level exams, usually taken from ages 16-18. The government has not said what would replace these assessments.

After consecutive Tory governments moved away

from appraisals based on a combination of continuous assessment and a final exam to just an exam-based system, it has now been decided that “teacher assessment is indeed a good method of giving reliable information about young people’s progress and achievements,” according to the NEU.

The coronavirus emergency bill passed on Tuesday includes draconian powers that “require educational institutions or childcare providers to stay open or relax some requirements around education legislation in order to help these institutions run effectively during the event of an emergency.” The legislation allows for reducing teacher-pupil ratios, meaning staff might face much larger classes, lowering school meal standards and relaxing provisions for those with special educational needs. The various devolved UK governments can also decide when to implement and when to dissolve the emergency powers, but potentially they could continue indefinitely.

There is no clear picture of how long schools may be closed, but Sir Patrick Vallance, the government’s chief scientific adviser, has said closures would have to extend for at least 13 to 16 weeks or longer to have an impact. This raises significant questions about how pupils will be taught. A Department of Education adviser was quoted in the press saying that an estimated two-fifths of England’s schools lacked sufficient infrastructure to deliver remote learning. Most schools have asked teachers to produce education packs for two weeks of work for pupils in the first instance.

Teachers, who have faced years of excessive workloads, budget pressures and performance-related pay, can now see the true value of their profession laid bare. Powers granted by the coronavirus bill are already being used, with the government ordering that schools will “stay open for those children of key workers and those vulnerable children during Easter holidays.”



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