

Calls for early reopening of UK schools met with widespread opposition

Tom Pearce
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Government ministers are now considering beginning a phased reopening of schools next month amid the worsening coronavirus pandemic. This follows a study by university researchers released earlier this month calling for schools to reopen “as soon as practical.”

According to the *Times*, the plan is for primary schools to start reopening along with nurseries in a “regionalised approach,” starting with those in areas outside coronavirus hot spots such as London and Birmingham. Gavin Williamson, the Conservative government’s education secretary, wants schools to reopen “in tandem” with changes to government advice about people going back to work. But there are reports that “some ministers are pushing for pupils to return before half-term next month.”

This week, Denmark became the first European country to start reopening its schools, despite parents refusing to send their children into an unsafe environment.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer has weighed into the debate and said that school re-openings should be prioritised in any end to the lockdown. The new leader cites concerns regarding the widening gap between disadvantaged pupils and the more privileged. The real concern, however, is that Labour be seen to be in the forefront of calls to end the lockdown so as to revive the economy and restore Labour’s reputation as the friend of business and finance.

The safety of teachers continues to be ignored by politicians. The National Education Union wrote to Prime Minister Boris Johnson calling for an end to speculation on school reopenings, knowing that no answer will be forthcoming. Dr. Patrick Roach, general secretary of the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers, said that people would be “horrified” if schools were used as a testing ground for the easing of restrictions.

Teachers need protection more than ever after reports of

three teacher deaths from COVID-19. Primary head teacher Wendy Jacobs died at the end of March in Barrow-in-Furness in Cumbria. Last week, a 35-year-old secondary teacher, Emma Clarke, contracted the virus and died in Runcorn, Cheshire. Neither had previous complications. Kate Fox, 56, a literacy teacher from Birmingham, died after complications. This is despite government guidance stating, “The scientific advice indicates that educational staff do not require personal protective equipment.”

The current UK guidance states that PPE “is needed by medical and care professionals providing specific close contact care, or procedures that create airborne risk, such as suctioning and physiotherapy, for anyone who has coronavirus (COVID-19) and is displaying symptoms.”

The guidance adds, “If you are not providing this care to someone with the virus and displaying symptoms, PPE is not needed. Asymptomatic people (people with the virus but not displaying symptoms) have a reduced viral load and so risk of transmission is considerably reduced.”

None of these assertions matches the experience of workers in public roles. Even medical and care professionals have not been provided with the correct equipment to combat the disease and are dying by the dozens as a result. Public transport workers and postal workers are also dying, even as the government and the employers insist that PPE is not needed. Royal Mail workers have had to fight for PPE and take independent strike action as the unions look on.

Teachers will have to do the same to protect their health. As a result of the changing evidence and deaths, teachers are demanding PPE and insisting that they should not be guinea pigs for a lockdown exit strategy.

The advocates of a reopening of schools often cite a preliminary study led by University College London (UCL) researchers on the impact of school closures on limiting the spread of COVID-19, which looked at the

previous virus spread of SARS and MERS. The report was published in the *Lancet Child and Adolescent Health*. Following its publication, “Send the pupils back for the good of the economy,” was the message peddled by the media outlets.

One co-author of the study, Russell Viner, who is president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, stated that the benefit gained from closing schools had to be weighed against the costs. “Children’s education is damaged and their mental health may suffer, family finances are affected, key workers may need to stay home to look after children and vulnerable children may suffer most.”

The study found that school closures “markedly increased the economic cost to the nation, in particular through forced absenteeism by working parents, in the UK, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Costs have been estimated to be as high as 0.2–1 percent of UK national gross domestic product (GDP) per annum for school closure for 12–13 weeks, or up to 3 percent of GDP for an eight-week closure in US studies.”

Instead of closing schools, the study suggested that head teachers “suspend affected classes or year groups, or changing the school organisation structure to reduce student mixing (e.g., by closing playgrounds, cancelling non-essential activities and meetings, keeping students in constant class groups or classrooms, increasing spacing between students in classes, shortening the school week, and staggering school start and lunch or break times across year groups or classes).”

Some of these points are included in the advice that the UK government is giving schools that are currently looking after key workers’ children and ministers believe they can now be implemented in the phased return.

Despite the report being largely inconclusive due to a lack of scientific evidence on the spread of Covid-19, it didn’t stop the media latching onto the headline that schools should reopen.

Robert Dingwall, a professor of sociology at Nottingham Trent University, told the BBC, “This is an important study that confirms what many of us suspected, namely that the public health benefits of school closures were not proportionate to the social and economic costs imposed on children and their families. It also underlines how the assumptions used in modelling the pandemic may rest on very flimsy foundations in terms of scientific evidence.

“This work suggests that UK schools could, and should, begin to reopen as soon as practicable after the initial

wave of cases has passed through.”

This led to uproar and despair from teachers, who have been struggling with the challenge of continuing classes while working from home—with teachers taking to social media and sharing their concerns with the online community. On Twitter @AlwaysComputing wrote, “What have I just seen on the BBC??? Shutting schools isn’t helping apparently. Forget about teachers’ health as well as the children and families. Their suggestion of what we should be doing is just mind blowing.”

@BadleyThomas tweeted, “Why even give this quarter-baked slip of an idea any air time?”

@LanghoLynne10 said: “Not a teacher but a Chair of Govs who cares about the health and well-being of all staff and children this is madness #notonmywatch”

@simonrenshaw wrote, “That report today was crackers. It’s like they didn’t look at the initial report from Imperial. Their modelling was pretty clear what happens when schools reopen. Why anyone would suggest this after such a short period is baffling.”

Teacher and parent Jeremy Taylor wrote to the *Guardian* asking, “How are pupils meant to travel to school? On crammed buses needed by key workers to get to work, driven by bus drivers, who once again will be put at risk. It’s important that the education community debunks this nonsense.”

Secondary School teacher Caiti Walter wrote, “[A]s long as the advice to the general public remains that we all stay at home, it would be nonsensical to remove social distancing expectations for school staff only.”

Teacher Kate Stockings told ITN news it “wouldn’t be realistic and would be ‘impossible’ in any school to expect students to stay two metres apart. It is dangerous to explore the possibility of opening schools again whilst social distancing measures are firmly in place across society.”

Head teachers have called for an end to the “pretence” that social distancing in schools is possible. Speaking on the BBC Radio 4 Today programme, a headteacher of a London school said, “Schools will open at some point. But what I don’t want is for people to perpetuate the lie, and it is a lie, that social distancing [in schools] is possible, it just isn’t.”



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