

Letter from UK teaching assistant against reopening of schools

20 May 2020

Sarah, a teaching assistant (TA) in a primary school in south Yorkshire, England, emailed the World Socialist Web Site about the Johnson government's plans to reopen UK schools.

I am opposed to schools reopening on June 1. Most of my colleagues are too. It's not safe to do so. The government's decision is not based on science or protecting the interests of children.

My school is in an area of high social deprivation. We are well aware of the problems caused by more than a decade of austerity. As in other schools, a skeleton staff look after children from vulnerable families on alternate days of the week. We are very close to our school families. Many have been forced to rely on food parcels to survive during the lockdown as they have not been able to access the free school meals and fruit usually provided at school.

On March 20, the day that all schools were closed, there were 714 new cases of coronavirus and 36 deaths. Today there were 2,412 new cases and 545 deaths. It's worse now than when the lockdown was announced!

On the government's own manipulated figures more than 35,000 people have been killed. Now the R rate has gone up and the epicentre of the virus has shifted from the capital to the north west and Yorkshire. How is any of this safe?

The government is treating schools like holding pens. They want companies making profit again, without any concern for people.

They're getting a free ride from the media on this insane policy. On the BBC's *Andrew Marr Show*, [government minister] Michael Gove said he could virtually "guarantee" teachers and pupils would be safe in schools. Then they started talking about "acceptable levels of risk". How is it "acceptable" to deliberately risk the life of any child, let alone reopen schools in the middle of a pandemic?

According to a recent poll only 5 percent of teachers

think it's safe enough for more children to return to school.

Every TA knows it will be impossible to enforce social distancing among our kids. There's no-way our 4-year-olds will stay two metres apart from their classmates or teachers. They will become the perfect vectors for any infection; this is proven by the constant cycle of colds and flu-like symptoms children get.

Children at this developmental stage are far more socially active and tactile than older children and adults. Our kids constantly touch, play with and hug their parents, siblings, grandparents, friends and school staff. They are always exploring, touching their eyes, noses and mouths—all the main points of entry for infections. Regular hand-washing and hygiene is something that we already model for our youngest, as they are always forgetting about it. Some of our kids also have toileting issues, bringing us into further vulnerability.

Some of our children have really complex additional needs and we need to have close contact. When we're comforting a distressed child we can't do this by standing two metres apart!

There's also no serious academic case for returning year 6 pupils to their schools. Our year 6 students would normally be going through transition activities in preparation for starting secondary school in September. Typically, this includes leavers assemblies and performances and residentials, usually at a remote location over the course of several days, as well as time spent by our pupils at their new school, getting to know teachers and the changed routine and environment.

I think the government's response to the coronavirus has exposed their absolute contempt for the working class. I saw a tweet today that none of the elite private schools including Eton, Harrow, Winchester and Rugby is reopening until September. So it's just the children of the working class who are to be sacrificed—including nursery aged children—to this cruel experiment.

And it's not just the Johnson government. Labour Party leader Keir Starmer and his Deputy Angela Rayner—who was Shadow Education Minister under Jeremy Corbyn—refused to endorse the stand taken by local councils who said they would not reopen schools in their area. They are all in it together.

We don't know where this virus might go next. Look at the poor kids who are contracting the Kawasaki disease. A 5-year-old girl is in hospital in Wakefield, West Yorkshire, who has a 20 percent chance of surviving. Her father wrote an open letter to Education Secretary Gavin Williamson in which he said the decision to reopen schools was like turning them into “death camps” and he compared government policy to a “war crime.”

Gavin Williamson says they will create a “protective bubble” around students in school. This brings to mind [Health Secretary's] Matt Hancock's pledge of a “protective shield” around care homes. Nobody trusts this government.

The unions are making all kinds of noises about how ludicrous the reopening is. But NASUWT and other teaching unions have already supported the reopening date and the National Education Union has stated that its opposition to the June 1 opening is just a “negotiating position”, according to the *Daily Telegraph's* report. They've already indicated their willingness for year 6 to return and are telling teachers to use a checklist to determine whether their own school is safe to go back.

But with coronavirus still running rampant, no school is safe. As of today, 1,500 primary schools have refused to re-open. There are 20,832 primary schools in total. We should all stand together—TAs and teachers, general staff and parents, and defeat the government's reckless agenda that threatens so many lives.

I like the idea at the end of your last article about the need to organise independent rank-and-file committees. I don't have faith in the union or local councils or any of the politicians. If there is going to be a fight, then it's us who have to organise it.



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