

”We want to be back, but not at the costs of people’s lives”

UK teachers speak on government’s back-to-school plan

Our reporters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with teachers this week about their opposition to the Johnson government’s reopening of schools.

Primary schools across England have been instructed to open their reception, year 1 and year 6 grade levels starting June 1. More than 95 percent of teachers are against the premature reopening, and 91 percent believe their health and safety, and that of their pupils, will not be protected.

Claire, a learning mentor and parent of a pre-school child in **Bradford** said, “I think it is too soon to reopen schools in terms of COVID-19 deaths and has little academic benefit. It is also likely to cause more unnecessary distress for children and young people—particularly under 5’s and any children with mental health issues—as they need routine, predictability, a feeling of calm, safety and proximity to trusted adults in order to feel grounded and be able to function, let alone learn.

“It is not physically possible to socially distance in a school. Even with the best of intentions children will not and cannot adhere to this. I know that teaching assistants have been asked to cover classes to reduce class sizes. However, this will not be possible within the budgets of many schools due to austerity cuts already put in place by the government. No extra money is being made available.”

Asked what she thought of the fact that elite private schools, such as Eton and Harrow, are not reopening until September, while state schools are being pushed to reopen, Claire said, “This is hugely hypocritical and is a very clear show of private school pupils and their families’ lives being worth more than those at state schools.

“The Conservative government have decimated all services in and around schools for deprived children and families and have shown nothing but contempt for anyone and anything connected to championing the needs of deprived children. I have many friends and family members who work in schools and they want to be back in schools, but not at the costs of people lives.”

Tom from **Cambridgeshire** said, “I can’t see how schools can open safely. I work in a secondary school and the key-worker children must be told continuously to stay away from one another. It is a negative experience all round. We only have 7 to 10 children and they can’t control themselves so any more pupils will be chaos.

“I feel teachers are the sacrificial lambs to the UK economy. The government’s job is to look after its citizens and they are happy for teachers, who educate the whole population—they are that important—to put their lives at risk. If mass gatherings aren’t allowed why are they even considering allowing one of the biggest mass gatherings on a daily basis?”

Zach from **Lincolnshire** said, “We have stayed open for key-worker children and the vulnerable. Staff haven’t had a break since the February half term. It’s not that we don’t want to go back. It’s just we want to ensure it is safe, for us and the children. We care!

“Some adults find it hard to social distance in shops. How are children supposed to manage?”

Regarding the decision on when to reopen schools, Zach said, “It should be the same rule for every school, not for headteachers or local authorities to decide. Testing needs to be achieved prior to opening.”

Kez, from **Cambridgeshire** said, “I can’t believe anyone would be so blind as to think primary schools are the right age group. We’ve been looking after the children of key workers and those we consider vulnerable in the school. We’ve been socially distancing and most days have had around 25 children in. The staff have all been involved in producing online content for children to remote learn and we have spent hours providing packs for children who can’t use computers, food for those disadvantaged families and phoning the children to ensure they’re ok.”

Speaking on the media’s depiction of teachers as “selfish” for opposing Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s reopening plans, Kez said, “It’s Insulting. I’ve been teaching my own children at home while also working in school, putting myself and my family at risk—and remotely working. I’ve been in school during the Easter holiday and I’m in most of next week during the half term. It’s not selfish to want to keep your community safe.”

Kez spoke about the difficulties in social distancing in schools, “We tried it with a group of our key-worker children. I had 9 in my class. Coming after breaks and lunch took 20 minutes as I got each child to wash their hands and sit down before the next could come in. As soon as they were outside, they couldn’t keep away from each other. This is year 5/6, with constant reminders and a willingness to conform. There’s no way this is possible in most of the primary school population.”

Regarding wealthy public schools such as Eton not opening until September, Kez said, “I’m behind the schools. I don’t think they should be opening either. These schools, with more room, more money and lower class-sizes, are taking steps based on keeping their children safe, and they can do this because the parents are rich. However, those that work for the rich must send their kids into schools so that rich people can stay rich. Who cares if working class people die? So long as corporations make money. They can apologise later, can’t they?”

Hannah, who works in a primary school in **West London** said she

was “happy to go because I think I’ve had it, so I’m not at risk, or my housemate. I’m worried about my colleagues, but I have offered to cover those who haven’t had it or are vulnerable. At the beginning my mum and dad got sick with the virus. I was really scared my mum was going to die.

“I wish the government had done more tracking and tracing. I was really upset about frontline workers going back, like construction workers. I felt it was being rushed into and throwing people under a bus, particularly those who have no union support.

“The government is just taking a risk with opening schools on June 1. They have abdicated all responsibility and are putting headteachers under a lot of pressure. Schools are doing their best, but I wouldn’t be surprised if teachers, children or parents end up dying.

“Our school has dealt with the pandemic well so far. Everybody kept really calm and staff focussed on how to best support the children. We’ve been sending home pencils and papers because not everyone has that. They are paying temporary staff. Now they are putting systems in place to make it as safe as possible—staggering year group starts and keeping people in bubbles.

“I worry about people feeling guilt tripped. The negative media campaign about teachers’ concerns overlooks all the hard work that teachers are doing. Teachers are recording lessons, sending work home, trying their best to maintain the children’s learning. My housemate is a secondary teacher and she is doing as much work if not more than when she’s at school. It’s unhealthy being on a computer all day and harder to engage with children. All the teachers I know, friends and colleagues, really miss being at school and are itching to go back. I’m leaving the school at the end of the year and would hate not to see my class again. We just want school to be safe for teachers, children and the families each go home too. The pandemic has made us question our role. Are we just a babysitter so parents can go to work?”

A **Spanish teacher** who works in two primary schools and a secondary school in **London**, said, “I disagree with the government’s rushed, confusing and risky plan. I agree with the British Medical Association that the early return is a risk.

“Since the pandemic was declared, two of the three schools I work at have been completely closed. One of them remained open for the children of key workers. Online teaching has proven to be efficient and students are making progress. We are using Google Classroom, Zoom lessons, giving feedback, uploading information, creating interactive materials and are making video tutorials. Many people are working more hours than ever. I am working much more. All my schools will reopen for some children in June.

“We would love all children and young people to be back in school as soon as possible. But it is vital that it is safe for everyone’s benefit, children, staff, and the wider community. Also, a lot of people are commuting to work, which is risky. My journey is an hour and a half each way on public transport—under normal circumstances.

“It is important that all schools open when it is safe—when there is testing, the right equipment to protect children and staff, social distancing, a lower number of deaths, safe ways of commuting to work, etc. I don’t think the government should make you go to work if they cannot tell you it’s safe. We have to put pressure as well, maybe calling a strike would be a good idea.”

Gary, a teacher from **Cambridgeshire**, said, “I have been on the duty rota for pupils of key workers. My observation is that with both the pupils and the staff, there was not a strong adherence to social distancing. When they say schools can reopen safely, I say good luck

with that. Have they walked down a corridor in a comprehensive before? Clearly not. Add to that the fact that schools already have too many pupils and not enough classrooms, social distancing is impossible.

“This virus has exposed the class inequalities that exist in society. Working-class people have borne the brunt of this from the start. If you’re an older bus driver living in a working-class area, for example, you’re more at risk than some manager working from a laptop in Surrey. The rich know how to look after their own.

“Until the rank and file realise that we need to be all out and indefinitely and until we kick the careerist bureaucrats into touch, we might as well sign a document saying that the government can do what the hell it wants to us.”

Lucy, a teaching assistant from **Southampton**, said of the school reopening, “It’s a completely inhuman decision aimed at getting workers back to work while the pandemic still rages. Children’s lives will be put at risk needlessly as well as teaching staff. Throughout lockdown we were never issued any PPE and to expect young children to practice social distancing is just ridiculous.”

She said things at her school had been confusing over the past two months, “Rotas were being drawn up, discarded and then redrawn based on who was happy to still come to work. Then arrangements had to be made for children receiving free school meals. We are a deprived area and have quite a few key-worker children. However, many key-worker parents did not send their children to school for fear of contracting COVID-19, so we had fewer than 20 children in attendance.

“The unions have no intention of standing in the way of government and big business. My experience of the teachers’ unions is that they advertise themselves as legal coverage (should you get accused of anything at work, etc.) and that is it. My union is Unison and its response was to send me a letter to give to my headteacher should I decide not to return to work.”



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