

“We’re just cannon fodder. This is a policy about economics not safety.”

Teachers, educators and parents speak out against UK September school reopening

Our reporters
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Teachers, educators, and parents spoke to the WSWS in opposition to the Johnson government’s plan to fully reopen schools in September despite the heightened risks from COVID-19 transmission.

Sam and Jane are two teachers from Yorkshire. Sam, who works in a school in Sheffield, said, “Throughout the pandemic the government has been very keen on publishing guidance that does not seem fit for purpose. This has been highlighted in their need to amend guidance sometimes thrice daily, making it hard to keep up and implement. September opening guidance is no different. There is little evidence to suggest science is underpinning or supporting these guidelines, so I oppose the reopening.

“Staff feel very scared and uncared about. Some feel their lives and wellbeing are being sacrificed for the economy. Staff have been working hard and creatively to maintain and deliver an inclusive curriculum for all children during lockdown. This has seen most staff work since February without a break. Many feel unsupported, as school staff have regularly been vilified in the press for raising concerns about the health and safety in schools during COVID, even though this was in response to following the government’s own health and safety advice.

“Many have significant underlying health issues that put them at risk yet are not even going to be given basic PPE [personal protective equipment]. A high percentage of staff are BAME [Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic] and the science around COVID and the risks to BAME groups remains unclear. Proposals such as all children to sit facing forward two metres apart from school adults are undoable in small classrooms with large class sizes.

“It is also a big ask for the younger children to keep their distance from staff, and those that work with small children know it is impossible to strictly monitor hygiene. Because of this, children are spreaders. The requirement is going to be that clinically vulnerable staff or those living with clinically vulnerable relatives are going to be in school for six-and-a-half to seven hours a day, with no PPE and with no social

distancing. This does not follow other workplace guidelines such as offices, where social distancing/perspex screens, etc., have to be strictly adhered to. The idea of ‘bubbles’ does little to reassure either. Yes, it keeps a group together in school, but it does not take account of what happens outside of it.

“Most of our school’s cohort are from the BAME communities. Parents have on the whole been very fearful. When school recently widened its opening beyond the vulnerable and key worker children, there wasn’t much uptake, with parents preferring to keep their children at home. A lot of our children live with extended family members, some of them elderly, or with health problems. In September, the choice for parents is removed with parents facing fines of up to £120 if they do not send their children to school. In contrast with the ‘softly, softly’ approach taken during full lockdown the message will be ‘education is not optional.’

“Some communities have suffered many bereavements due to COVID and we know some children have high anxieties around this. Many children and families see the school as the hub of the community and without access for such a long period have felt isolated. For our vulnerable groups school represents stability and many have still attended, but the sterile measures in place have made it difficult to reach these children and they have struggled without their friendship groups and the social norms usually found at school.

“But staff also want the whole school community to be safe. Despite wanting normality, staff acknowledge that cannot come at a cost. Staff do not think the government is keeping the school community safe and therefore oppose reopening.

“The National Education Union supporting the September return is very disappointing. School staff are in a worse position now than they were. The five tests set out by the NEU around school safety have not been met, yet they are not opposing.

“I agree with the Socialist Equality Party proposals that schools should not be opened until safe. As the government has shown a disregard for both school staff safety and the school community, I am in favour of the workforce deciding on the

terms and conditions in which schools reopen.”

Jane has worked in two education authorities across West and South Yorkshire over the past 40 years. Asked about the government plans for September, she said, “I feel unsure about it. They are now talking about 30 children in a class. The children want to go back. But this makes the adults uneasy, both staff and parents. In our area there are a lot of COVID-19 hotspots.

“I think that a full reopening is unrealistic. There will be a lot of anxious staff. It’s been shown that children can’t socially distance really. There is a great risk of them transmitting the virus back to their families.

“I think the unions should fight for us. They are only in jobs because of us. Everyone wants to go back, but only when it’s safe. As we go, there is more and more found out about the virus. We should listen to the health experts because the government has got another agenda. Health should come before anything else.”

Helen, a teacher from Lincolnshire, said, “I am clinically vulnerable, and this is a massive worry for me going back to school. In my school, all year groups are returning as usual with zoning in place for different year groups in bubbles of hundreds of children. Staff are really concerned about their safety. I am really disappointed with the education unions. They are not fighting for our rights.

“I agree with what the SEP is proposing: the setting up of rank-and-file safety committees in schools are necessary to support families and working-class communities. We need to be safe.”

Lara, a teacher from the East Midlands, said, “It feels like we’re being thrown to the wolves. I am very worried for older members of staff. Rules which we have been told need to apply in public spaces (social distancing, mask wearing) aren’t being applied in schools—and this isn’t following scientific advice. We are reopening to all students, and staff are very nervous about going back into that environment.

“The unions need to do more to protect teachers who, come September, are going to be the most exposed section of society, teaching in cramped classrooms with no protection. I fully agree that there needs to be safety committees set up to support teachers and parents.”

Chelsea, a teacher, said, “I am concerned it’s too early, but look forward to seeing the pupils. I’m worried for my health and the health of my family. Our school is reopening to all pupils in September with year group bubbles and I am concerned that the safety guidelines are not going to keep people safe.

“The unions haven’t stood up. I’m worried that my life and the lives of the students I teach are being put in danger without the government fully thinking of the implications.”

Steve, a teacher from Essex, said, “It’s really worrying, something needs to be done to change this. There are too many children returning at one time. The unions need to be on our

side, but they have gone quiet since the government announced their plans for September. I think schools should only be open when safe and should do blended learning and small bubbles until the science shows that it is completely safe to return.”

Hayley, a parent from Cambridgeshire, said, “I think that schools are doing their best without guidance from the government. The government has been inconsistent and sloppy. I feel that staff should be able to wear masks. Social distancing is hard for children, but it is about managing risks. I feel that schools should revert to online teaching if there is another Covid-19 outbreak. My children’s school is fully opening in September and we are expecting staggered start/end times and classes to be kept separate. I think it is fair to expect proper funding of all public services. It is clear this hasn’t been happening.”

Kez, a teaching assistant from Cambridgeshire, said, “It’s a complete joke. We all want kids back in school but teachers and TAs [teaching assistants] are not being protected. My school is full steam ahead with reopening.

“We’re expected to just put up and shut up. We’re just cannon fodder. This is a policy about economics, not safety. Closing schools is inconvenient to parents, who struggle to work if their kids are off. It disproportionately affects lower-income families. The staff I have spoken to are nervous, but happy to be teaching the kids again. The parents’ views I have come across are mixed.”

Carol, a primary school teacher, said “I was in horror at the government’s plans for large ‘bubbles’ in schools and lack of distancing and masks. It is insane that there will be no social distancing in schools, no personal protection for children or staff, and no school closures if children or staff record positively for COVID-19.

“I am disappointed with the NEU. Their refusal to fight despite massive opposition among teachers to the reopening of schools has led to the government’s plans going ahead.”



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