

UK government declares testing and wearing masks “not compulsory” in reopened schools

Robert Stevens
26 February 2021

All state schools and further education colleges in England will be fully opened from March 8. Ahead of this, pupils in foundation year in Wales and those in Primary Years 1 to 3 in Scotland resumed face-to-face learning on February 22.

The Conservative government is opening schools as part of its homicidal herd immunity agenda that will see all shops opened on April 12 and the entire economy opened by June 21. School openings are a “national priority” of the government and opposition Labour Party so that parents are free to return to work and big business can keep the profits flowing in. A week after the March 8 openings, from March 15, the next phase of Scotland school returns, including primaries and some secondary schools, will go ahead.

For all their nauseating talk of making sure that children don’t “miss out” on their education, the Tory government don’t give a damn about the life prospects of children from working class backgrounds. These criminals are responsible for the social murder of over 135,000 people in Britain—where Covid-19 is listed on the death certificate—depriving many children of parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

On Monday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the lifting of what he described as the “last lockdown,” which he admitted would result in “more infections, more hospitalisations and... more deaths.”

All schools must be back within a week from March 8, with the government only allowing secondary schools to stagger the return over seven days—supposedly to allow the Covid testing of all pupils to be carried out.

Yet within hours of Education Secretary Gavin Williamson announcing his plans Wednesday, the government had torn up his policy, including that masks had to be worn at all times in school. On Thursday, School Minister Nick Gibb told *Sky News* in relation to testing pupils twice a week, “We want to make sure it is

not compulsory in that sense, and they will need the permission of the parents.” While declaring it was “highly recommended” to wear masks in schools, he added, “We are saying it is not mandatory for schools to have masks in classrooms...”

Despite being key workers in workplaces that even the prime minister has described as “vectors of transmission,” teachers will not be fast tracked to receive a vaccination.

The maniacal policy of sending 10 million pupils and education staff and several million more college students aged 16-18 back into unsafe classrooms can only result in a vast surge of COVID-19 and places the safety and lives of children in danger. This is being enforced with less than 1.5 percent of the population (734,000 people) have had the required two vaccination doses and where the *R* Reproduction rate value is just below 1. It took seven months and two national lockdowns, in November and January, to get *R* finally below 1.

Everyone who is supporting the back to work/back to school agenda knows where this leads. Within two months of schools reopening last September, 8,000 schools suffered infections with coronavirus, with schools accounting for 29 percent of all COVID-19 clusters. The infection rate among secondary school aged pupils surged by 2,000 percent and 600,000 pupils were forced to self-isolate at home.

The government and a select group of scientific advisers continually stress that COVID does not represent a danger to children, who only suffer “mild” symptoms. However, in November, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), the government’s advisory body, wrote that the second wave of the pandemic had seen the prevalence of COVID-19 in school-age children rising “significantly”, with the increase “initially among those in school year 12 (age 16/17) – age 24 and young people (e.g. secondary school age).” SAGE noted that “The rising prevalence was first visible around the time that

schools reopened.”

Reopening schools is bound up with increasing the exploitation of teachers and working them to the bone, and on a shoestring budget.

The government is requesting that secondary schools deliver face-to-face summer schools, exposing pupils and staff to even more danger. Just £400 million in funding was been announced, including more for the National Tutoring Programme, on top of £300 million announced in January for catch-up projects. This amounts to just £6,000 for the average primary school and £22,000 for each secondary. Shared between just over 8 million pupils in English state schools, it equates to a mere £86 for each child.

Earlier this month, schools minister Gibb told Parliament’s education committee he was “open to all ideas” on how to make up for lesson time lost to the pandemic. Among ideas being considered were longer school days and shorter holidays.

The pro-Tory *Daily Mail* hailed an extra £200 million towards “the National Tutoring Programme and other tuition schemes” as “it could be spent on extra clubs, activities or teaching for those who have fallen behind.” While noting, “However, radical measures previously discussed, like permanently trimming the summer holidays or lengthening the school day, do not figure in the plans,” the *Mail* pointed out, “Despite this, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson did not rule out lengthening the school day to help pupils catch up from the coronavirus disruption.”

Given the governments extensive privatisation of school aged education, the first Academies have already come forward, among these the Brighter Futures Learning Partnership Trust, which runs Hungerhill School, Doncaster University Technology College and five primary schools in Doncaster, South Yorkshire. Another chain welcoming the policy, The GORSE Academies Trust, which runs 11 schools in the Leeds area, announced its intention to open over summer.

Teachers, in poll after poll and on social media, have voiced their opposition to returning to work under unsafe conditions, but are up against trade unions who are colluding in the government’s plans. The National Education Union (NEU) describes Johnson’s “big bang” reopening schools as “irresponsible”. Yet they have called no industrial action to prevent it. The NEU praised the Scottish and Welsh governments—who reopened even before Johnson—stating, “We believe a phased return like all other nations in the UK which is the right approach”.

On Friday, joint NEU leader Mary Bousted commented in *Schools Week*, “Now the prime minister says again that opening schools is his priority. He wants our journey out of lockdown to be irreversible. On both counts, we agree. Once back, it is crucial that pupils remain in school and continue to benefit from learning in classrooms. Unfortunately, Boris Johnson’s ‘big bang’ school return jeopardises that.”

The unions are allowing hundreds of thousands of their members to return when they know what the outcome will be. This week, Bousted retweeted a post from *Schools Week* reading, “The Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling said its ‘consensus view’ was that the opening of primary and secondary schools was ‘likely to increase effective R by a factor of 1.1 to 1.5 (10 per cent to 50 per cent)’.”

National Association of Head Teachers leader, Paul Whiteman, could not make his support for teachers carrying out summer tuition in classrooms in the middle of a pandemic any clearer declaring, “Summer schools will be of value for some pupils but it will be important not to overwhelm students.”

A foretaste of the disaster to come was clear within two days of Scotland’s schools reopening this week. An entire class (around 27 pupils) in Gilmerton Primary School in Edinburgh were forced to self-isolate after a coronavirus case was confirmed at the school. Pupils were told they would need to stay at home for 10 days.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is opposed to the unsafe opening of schools and is mobilising education workers, parents and students against it. We urge attendance at our next meeting on Saturday, March 6. To participate and to receive our regular newsletter register here .



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact