

Shorter holidays and longer work day under UK government's school catch-up plan

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Ahead of the reopening of schools begun March 8 in England, with Scotland and Wales returned earlier, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson announced the government is considering a five-term year, a longer school day and shorter holidays in the summer. The six-week summer break could lose two weeks.

The proposals will increase the risk of pupils and educators catching and spreading the coronavirus. Dressed up as an “education recovery package for children and young people” to catch-up on lost learning during the pandemic, it will intensify the exploitation of education workers—already exhausted by the government’s schools policies since the pandemic began.

Williamson told Sky News the government's education recovery commissioner, Sir Kevan Collins, will “leave no stone unturned” in planning a catch-up programme. “We've got to look at what is going to have the biggest positive impact on children's lives,” he said.

The mind boggles at the pretence that children’s welfare is a government priority. Over the last decade, education has been starved of funding with billions of pounds cut. And everything it has done during the pandemic, driven by its homicidal herd immunity agenda, has severely impacted on children.

Children have lost parents, grandparents, become ill themselves and in a small number of cases died. The disruption to education is due to the government’s failure to stem the pandemic and fully resource safe remote learning.

The Tory’s refusal to implement the necessary public health measures to suppress the virus—with the direct collaboration of the Labour opposition and trade unions—and to financially support families and small businesses has led to a health and social catastrophe. The Covid death toll has surpassed 140,000, when including the virus being mentioned on a death certificate. Prime Minister Boris Johnson absurdly claimed, “The reopening

of schools marks a truly national effort to beat this virus,” while telling the public to expect “more infections, more hospitalisations... more deaths”.

Speaking to the BBC, Williamson said, “[W]e are taking a cautious approach because we intend for it to be an irreversible approach and that schools will continue to remain open.” This is in line with government policy that there will be no more lockdowns. He made a commitment that schools would reopen after the Easter break in April.

While Johnson said he was “very hopeful” the reopening of schools would proceed as planned, one school sent an entire year group home after only a week. The *Metro* reported last Friday that 230 students at Budmouth Academy in Weymouth, Dorset went home to isolate for 10 days after several year 10 pupils tested positive for Covid.

Last week, hundreds of children were sent home from at least 14 Greater Manchester schools only days after they reopened. On Monday, it was reported that a school in Gloucestershire school partially closed after confirmed Covid cases saw multiple year groups forced into isolation. The school was the fourth to be partially closed in the county in one week.

The education unions have been an indispensable prop in the reopening of unsafe schools, in the teeth of mass opposition from their members. The response of joint national secretary of the National Education Union (NEU), Mary Bousted, to the government’s “recovery support package” was only to complain that “The £200 million funding for the National Tutoring Programme won't be anywhere near big enough to meet the learning and social needs the Government have identified, which have been created by Covid disruption.” She added, “The NEU and the Sutton Trust [educational charity] have recommended to Government that £750 million is needed as the first immediate boost to Pupil Premium. Instead, £302 million has been announced.”

Bousted even praised the way the government are allowing reopened schools to use the few crumbs offered them. “Giving flexibility to schools to use the Recovery Premium in ways that they judge will best support their disadvantaged learners is vital. It is a rare recognition by Government that schools know best.”

Labour have described as a “national mission” shared with the Tories to have all schools fully reopened in the middle of a pandemic. Shadow Education Secretary Kate Green criticized the recovery package’s “lack of ambition”, calling for catch-up breakfast clubs.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer and Green announced the launch of a “Bright Future” taskforce to develop a national strategy for children’s recovery. Any progressive or child centred development will be absent, as the “taskforce” is under the leadership of former education secretary Estelle Morris—who worked under Tony Blair’s Labour government which started the Academy schools programme. Academies, publicly funded but privately run, were developed as a critical component of the marketisation of education.

Teachers have already raised concerns, epitomised by a *TES* article penned by London primary school head teacher Colin Dowland, with the headline, “Longer days? Shorter holidays? Watch the resignations.”

The government is utilising the pandemic to usher in long-planned education restructuring, to the detriment of educators and pupils. Williamson told Sky News the recovery package, to be developed over the next 18 months, will introduce fundamental changes in the education system.

The credentials of Williamson’s Education Recovery Commissioner Sir Kevan Collins are telling. He was chief executive of the Education Endowment Foundation from 2011 to 2019. Prior to this, he was chief executive of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, overseeing a budget of £1 billion and 8,000 staff. In this post he implemented £50 million cuts over three years.

Bousted welcomed Collins’ appointment, saying, “We look forward to working with Sir Kevan Collins on a long-term strategy to respond to the inequality which blights children’s lives.”

Successive Conservative and Labour governments have introduced reforms taking forward the marketisation of education claiming this would be the basis for “raising standards in education” and “closing the attainment gap.” Poverty, inequality and the attainment gap have increased under all governments.

Hand in hand with the redistribution of wealth from the

poorer sections of society to the super-rich has been a raft of “reforms” in education, including the imposition of the market model and increasing privatization. These have been massively detrimental to teachers’ pay, pensions and conditions, and have contributed to a reversal of child-centred approaches to teaching and learning.

The following “reforms” were introduced without the unions lifting a finger.

- * Local Management of Schools (1988) whereby schools control their own budget under conditions in which education funding has been slashed.

- * The National Curriculum (1988), leading to target-driven teaching alongside rigorous testing and punitive Ofsted inspections.

- * Turning schools into academies (begun in 2000 under Labour), which are privately run but publicly financed.

- * The outsourcing of school support services to private companies.

Over this period, the workload of teachers has vastly increased, along with the stress levels of teachers and pupils.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls for emergency meetings in every school and campus to demand the closure of schools and other education settings, in order to implement policies to protect the population, provide adequate remote learning and defend livelihoods.

The fight against the pandemic, for decent pay and conditions, and a fully resourced education system based on scientific theories of child learning and development requires new organisations of struggle independent of the unions, based on a network of rank-and-file committees to fight to unite workers across all sectors and all nations in a common struggle for socialism. We call on teachers, parents and students to take up this fight and join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today .



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