

SEA Statement: Schools Must Open as Safely as Possible in September

The Prime Minister says there is a moral duty to reopen schools in September. He is right. However, his Secretary of State's recipe for reopening is likely to lead to more not fewer school closures because the government is insisting on a return to normal in totally abnormal times. By refusing to allow schools, particularly secondary ones, to vary attendance and experiment with blended learning techniques, they are stopping schools from creating capacity for smaller groups and learning bubbles. This will also increase pressure on public transport in cities and create scenarios where outbreaks are more likely

What do we know?

- The Public Health England Report out on 24th August states that children are more at risk of catching Corona virus at home. However, this report is based solely on primary schools returning last term. Also of course it rather missed the point. The risk to young children is minimal, but teaching staff face a much bigger one, as do older members of multi-generational households where children might be living.
- The WHO is now saying all children from 12 upwards should be wearing masks in enclosed spaces and Scotland is making pupils and staff wear them in communal areas.
- By June 2020, 148 UK Education staff had died of CV19. A higher rate than other occupations •Teachers 81 •Teaching management 11 •Nursery & Childminding 18 •Teaching Assistants 21 •Lollipop & playground 11 •School Secretaries 3 •Youth workers 3
- 21 schools in Scotland already impacted by the virus since reopening. 41 schools impacted in Berlin since reopening last week.
- There are always spikes in respiratory illnesses after schools reopen every September
- An EU report says there is conflicting published evidence on the impact of school closure/re-opening on community transmission levels, although the evidence from contact tracing in schools, and observational data from a number of EU countries suggest that re-opening schools has not been associated with significant increases in community transmission. *Decisions on control measures in schools and school closures/openings should be consistent with decisions on other physical distancing and public health response measures within the community, it goes on to say.*
- The Japanese government are campaigning for its people to stay away from enclosed poorly ventilated, crowded indoor places and refrain from having conversations in them. They claim these are the highest risk particularly when combined. Ominously This sounds like many English schools.
- The EAGLE group of education experts report insists that data sharing, test track and trace must be working effectively for schools to operate safely. It also points to differences between primary and secondary pupils in terms of risk.

The government though appears to be saying lack of knowledge is equivalent to knowing schools are safe. The precautionary principle has been abandoned and danger signals ignored. It has reluctantly agreed to make mask wearing compulsory in areas where here has to be a local lockdown. This is a half-baked approach. It has abandoned any insistence on social distancing, and worse it is pretending, almost Canute like that, that its guidelines

can be implemented without risk. Worse still Williamson has let right wing ideology about pedagogy creep into his decision making

Young children are at least risk and evidence about them infecting adults is slight. It is also easier to operate bubbles in primary schools where breaks and lunches can be staggered. But this is not the case in many primary schools especially those which lack spare classroom space and staffing capacity.

Evidence appears to be pointing towards secondary school pupils being much more likely to transmit the virus than younger children. Older children come to school independently and mix socially without the presence of adults. The idea that schools can keep 'bubbles' of these pupils separate is illusory. When the risk of travelling in large groups on public transport is factored in the risk is even greater still. Secondary schools have operated in Britain with tiny numbers of pupils since March so their experience to date is not relevant. Bubbles and social distancing are not possible if the current secondary school curriculum is to be maintained. Even in a school where pupils are very compliant it will not be possible to prevent adolescents mixing closely either on their way to school, or in the playground. It's what they do. Setting and options mean pupils move in different groups all the time in secondary schools. In case of an outbreak, secondary schools cannot just suddenly change the way they organise overnight. If they are already operating at capacity because of the need to timetable. The government's guidelines recognise none of these realities.

Furthermore, the government appears to be willing to use the attendance laws to force parents to send pupils to school. At the same time no provision is being made for staff living with older and more vulnerable people.

How can schools reopen safely?

We have to accept that this is about reducing risk as far as possible not making schools totally safe. One does not need to be a scientist to discern that adolescent and post-adolescent people crowded together in poorly ventilated places will increase the spread of the virus. Evidence of this happening in workplaces such as factories and food processing plants is already clear. Why should schools be in any different? Handwashing and extra cleaning appear to be the only added safety measures in the guidelines.

We should be supporting the unions across the whole sector which now extend from ASCL to Unison in expressing concerns and asking valid questions. The 'no ifs, no buts' demand on school reopening is not helpful in this context and may yet prove to be a costly mistake.

The SEA calls on Labour to make the following demands on the government to ensure school reopening is as safe as possible.

- Implement effective testing, tracking and tracing. Local authority teams with local knowledge are far more useful to schools than outsourced national programmes
- Make routine testing available to school staff and make mask wearing for staff and older pupils compulsory in communal areas and corridors. Labour should be focusing on these public health issues rather than distancing themselves from the unions.

- Put in place clear and unequivocal guidelines for action when a school experiences an outbreak. There should be no pressure on schools to stay open when a local outbreak needs to be controlled.
- Abandon the edict that all schools especially secondaries should be open for all 100% of the time recognising that some schooling supplemented by independent learning is better than schools closing altogether as a result of an outbreak.
- Work with school leaders, unions and local authorities to come up with innovative ways of organising schools in the current context. In secondary schools and FE, smaller groups, spaces for independent learning particularly for disadvantaged pupils, blended learning, staggered start times, etc could all be part of the mix. Schools could be innovative in the provision they make, some of which might transfer to a post COVID world. Schools should share the emerging practice to see what is working best.
- Suspend court action against parents for poor school attendance and make provision for school staff living with people especially vulnerable to the impact of a COVID infection.