



November 5<sup>th</sup> 2020

Shadow Secretary of State for Education  
House of Commons

Dear Kate Green,

I am writing to you about the SEA's concerns re the current crisis and schools opening during the lockdown. The prime minister has recently stated that it is 'a moral duty' to keep schools open. Keir Starmer has echoed this to a degree but does not accept this will not always be possible.

These catch phrases are not helpful because they disregard the reality of the virus. COVID 19 unfortunately does not stop transmission at school gates. Professor John Edmonds, a member of SAGE, said on Newsnight last Monday that the proposed lockdown would have little impact on infection rates, one reason being school closures were not included. Andy Burnham and other northern mayors have made this point. Keir Starmer himself wanted to implement a circuit breaker over half term because this would include a period of school closure. Unfortunately, sometimes politicians want to disregard the evidence in order to make populist points. What should have been said is that it is our moral duty to provide education to our young people which is both as safe and effective as possible in the current circumstances, and that includes the mental and physical well-being of pupils and staff.

The NEU has called for a four-week closure. We support a period of closure too for the following reasons: -

- **To contribute to the effectiveness of the lockdown** as explained above
- **To gain more control over the impact of the virus on schools.**  
Schools have reopened after a week's break. Already some are being hit by the virus in ways that are making more closures very likely and the numbers of affected pupils (around 400,000 have been impacted) will grow in coming weeks. There is a primary school in the Portsmouth area, where 5 staff members including the head and deputy have contracted COVID simultaneously. Finding supply teachers is becoming increasingly difficult so the school will have to close. Schools up and down the

country will be hit in this way. No doubt disadvantaged areas will be hit worst. Meanwhile the government is using an outsourced advice service which gives responds to schools using a script to try to hide the impact of the virus in schools. Some schools will no doubt escape infections though, and we will be left with a patchwork of educational disadvantage caused by a failure to plan for the virus.

- **To devise and plan the implementation of quality on line provision and equitable home learning.**

This is now statutory and schools were given little notice and no time to make this work for their pupils. One suspects the lack of notice would push schools into the arms of off the shelf providers who stand to make considerable profits out of the government diktat. Good schools will want to create resources to meet the needs of their learners. On line learning needs funding properly too. Head teachers have been demoralised by only receiving around 20% of promised lap tops for disadvantaged pupils.

- **To give time to schools to prepare for a plan B where not all pupils are in school all the time.**

This should apply to at least to all secondary schools. The NEU has also called for a rota system after the period of closure. We would not want to impose on schools just one way of organising, though the NEU has found that the rota method is working well in some sixth form colleges at the moment. The 'no ifs no buts, all children back in school, all the time' mantra needs to cease. Schools supported by LAs and others should be given the flexibility to run blended learning programmes where pupils are in school for at least half the time. In some cases extra buildings could be made available to schools to use too. These ways of working need careful planning. Parents need informing in advance so they can make the relevant arrangements. Not all schools will necessarily have to take these steps but all will need to prepare for them.

We would urge you as Shadow Secretary of State to consider what the epidemiologists are saying. Instead of seeing their evidence as a mere inconvenience as Johnson does, we should be planning education provision which addresses their concerns. In putting forward these arguments, Labour may initially face accusations of failing in its moral duty to children. Politics should be about leadership not just populist sloganizing. Labour would be proved right in the long run

Your sincerely