

All schools in England to open in September

By Tom Pearce
24 June 2020

UK Education Minister Gavin Williamson announced on Friday that all pupils in all year groups in England will go back to school in September. He said the government was “signed up to bring every child back, in every year group, in every school.”

The announcement follows the government’s climbdown only 10 days earlier over the reopening of primary and nursery schools to all children. This was met with huge resistance by parents, who rightly feared risks to their children being exposed to COVID-19.

The government claims guidance will follow in a few weeks’ time as to how the full reopening could be achieved safely. The reality is that it is not possible to safely have all children in school with a deadly virus circulating. On average, primary schools have 28 children per class, whilst secondary schools have 22. There will be no social distancing in cramped and often dilapidated buildings. Children will be forced to share resources and play together.

There is speculation that the model to be used for the reopening in September is based on the Northern Ireland (NI) blueprint, which is yet to be put to the test. Secondary pupil “bubbles” are to be extended from 15 to the whole class. In some schools, 34 children can be found in a class.

The document from the NI Education restart programme calls for classes to stay in one classroom and the teachers to move between, with food being delivered to the classroom. Classrooms could be located in large halls and canteens to ensure social distancing. Students will also have staggered breaks. It also states that students will only need to be one metre apart in classrooms. Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced Tuesday that the two-metre social-distancing rule was to be ended and for people to stand one metre apart instead. But any social distancing is impossible in a classroom environment.

To push its plans through, the government has

repeated its fraudulent claims that it is acting in the interests of “disadvantaged children,” who will fall behind in their education. This claim is refuted by the fact that there were already 3.2 million children living in poverty—9 in every classroom of 30—before the pandemic.

It was only last week that Johnson was forced to do a U-turn on providing free schools meals for 1.3 million children during the summer holidays. This campaign was not led by a Labour politician or trade union leader but by footballer Marcus Rashford, who forced the government to place the interests of hungry children on the parliamentary agenda.

The government has jumped on a letter published last week by 1,500 of the UK’s paediatricians calling on the Johnson government to “publish a clear plan for getting children back to school as the first step in a national recovery programme for children and young people.”

Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health president Professor Russell Viner, a member of the government’s scientific advisory group Sage and a signatory to the letter, has warned lockdown is doing kids “more harm than the virus itself.” This reactionary perspective has been utilised throughout the pandemic to put the interests of the economy before health—based on evidence that children are less likely to become seriously ill from the virus than adults. However, evidence has also shown that children are just as likely to get the virus as older people. They are often asymptomatic but can be vectors for the spread of the disease.

The government’s decision to return to the full opening of schools has been taken without any systematic review of the impact of the wider reopening of the economy, which began on June 15, and its impact on the infection rate—the statistics are not yet available. There is some evidence, however, that the

reopening of schools to wider numbers has produced spikes in infections.

A school in Barnsley, South Yorkshire, was forced to close last week for two days. The drastic move was taken by Joseph Locke Primary School after two members of staff from the same household began feeling symptoms while in the building, and then tested positive for COVID-19. The school was forced to pick up the bill for a total of 75 children and 67 members of staff to take coronavirus tests amid fears of an outbreak among its community.

The September opening of schools announcement followed widely circulated reports that some 2.3 million children are not accessing online learning. Whilst claiming to speak in the interests of these children, the government did not explain why it is yet to provide 700,000 laptops needed for children to access this learning.

Last week, Williamson said in the House of Commons that more than 100,000 laptops had already been delivered, although many expecting a delivery have said they have not received them. A further 230,000 will supposedly be delivered by the end of June. The government has reduced its pledge from 700,000 needed to only 360,000—if even these materialise at all!

Williamson's plan to reopen schools came with a "pledge" of a £1 billion fund to catch up on what children have missed while schools have been closed. The fund in theory will mean that the most disadvantaged pupils will have access to tutors through a £350 million programme over the year from September.

How and where the tutors will materialise was not explained, and school leaders have yet again not been consulted. But the cross-party unity continued with Labour Shadow Education Secretary Rebecca Long-Bailey stating that Williamson had his "first volunteer" in providing targeted tuition to pupils.

The additional funds of £650 million will be given to primary and secondary schools to spend on one-to-one or group tuition for any pupils they think need it. However, this still leaves the education sector criminally underfunded. The amount equates to a measly rise of 1 percent, leaving total spending still 3 percent below 2010 levels in real terms. The £650 million pot only means about £80 extra for each

student. Early years and further education settings are not included.

The teaching unions have continued to offer their services and are grovelling before the government to be included in their plans in response to the latest announcement. Kevin Courtney, joint general secretary of the National Education Union (NEU), said, "One week ago, we wrote to the Prime Minister about our 10-point National Education Recovery Plan, a set of practical measures to make the safe return of schools possible. It is not too late for his Government to start engaging properly with unions before making further pledges which turn out to be unachievable."

Mary Bousted, also joint secretary of the NEU, offered advice on how to get around social-distancing rules: "If the government retains its social distancing rules then they can't [open schools in September], so that's why we then need to look at an education recovery plan, which is focused on more than school buildings."

The Socialist Equality Party has outlined the only viable perspective to defend the lives and social interests of the working class. We say: Opposition to the reopening of schools can and must be the spearhead of an independent movement of the working class against the Johnson government and its murderous back-to-work campaign. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the building of action committees, independent from the trade unions, to safeguard the health of children, teachers and the entire working class. Teachers and other educators should contact the Socialist Equality Party to discuss organising this political fightback.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>