

UK government's guidance on school reopening: Back to "normal" from September

By Tania Kent
3 July 2020

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson announced the government's guidance on the full reopening of schools in September yesterday. Stripped of its sophistry, evasions and lies, the plan is for the resumption of teaching as normal.

There will be no social distancing, no personal protection for children or staff and no school closures if children or staff record positively for COVID-19.

These measures will be enforced through threat of fines of £120 for parents who fail to send their children to school. Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, will replace their statutory school inspections in the autumn term, with inspections based on ensuring all children are back and "catch-up" work is being carried out effectively.

The conditions have been set for the deadly virus to be allowed to "let rip" throughout schools and the communities. Not even the minimal measures around the "1 metre plus" social distancing rule and provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) for adults in the workplace will be provided for the protection of children. Members of Parliament cannot gather in the one room without social distancing, but children can!

Children in primary schools are expected to return to classrooms of 30. All pupils must face the front and cannot sit in circles. The teacher is expected to teach from the front, 2 metres away from children, and not spend more than 15 minutes with a child at a time. Teachers will have to project their voices so that all children can hear and thereby risk droplets circulating throughout the classroom.

In secondary schools, children can form "bubbles" of up to 240—entire year groups! These are meaningless measures. They contradict all advice hitherto stated on social distancing. These children will also be catching

buses to school, mixing with a myriad of other "bubbles" of children and adults.

The guidance opposes the closure of schools in the event of positive cases. Local health protection teams will advise on the "appropriate action," which could include small groups of young people and staff being asked to self-isolate for up to 14 days. Where there are two or more confirmed cases in a two-week period, health protection teams may ask a larger number of children or young people to self-isolate at home.

The guidance opposes the use of PPE by both children and teachers, as this "interferes" with learning. PPE must only be used if a staff member is sat with a child with COVID-19 symptoms and is waiting to be collected by a family member.

The government insists that head teachers must not make their plans on reopening schools contingent on the need to allocate any additional space to accommodate high numbers of children, or 1 metre social distancing rules. They can only rely on existing school spaces.

On June 19, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that all schools will be open in September to all children, backed up two days later with the issuing of threats of fines for parents who did not want to send their children to school. Johnson was determined to stem widespread opposition to schools reopening to maintain his narrative that the pandemic is in retreat. This was despite mounting evidence that the easing of the lockdown and partial return to school from June 1 was producing high levels of infection rates in many cities, particularly in poorer and disadvantaged communities.

On the very same day as Williamson announced the guidance for the full reopening of schools, all schools in Leicester were forced to close as a "local lockdown"

was imposed due to infection rates which had increased by over 70 percent over a two week period.

The government for the first time acknowledged that children were vectors for the virus, as five schools in Leicester already had to close their doors. On Tuesday, Health Minister Matt Hancock said that one of the main reasons for imposing the Leicester lockdown was an increase in the number of under 18 year olds who have tested positive, explaining, “because children can transmit the disease, although they are highly unlikely to get ill from the disease, we think that the safest thing to do is to close the schools...”

There are 36 other area boroughs throughout England, with 15 in London and other disadvantaged areas in cities such as Bradford, Leeds, and Doncaster, which have high rates of infection.

The government is steaming ahead with its plans, declaring “Super Saturday” on July 4 where virtually all elements of the lockdown will be removed, including the opening of pubs and restaurants. It is under these dangerous circumstances that children will be returning to schools.

Dismissing the need for social distancing in schools, Williamson said, “It’s not about 1 metre, it’s not about 2 metres.” He did not say what it is about—not the health and safety of children and staff but restarting the economy in the interests of the corporations and super-rich.

Labour’s new Shadow Education Secretary Kate Green’s maiden speech in Parliament focussed on how belated the announcement was, and that Labour welcomes the reopening of schools. She thanked Williamson for a phone call welcoming her to the shadow cabinet and giving her the guidance beforehand to study.

The education trade unions have played a criminal role in allowing the government to press ahead with its plans. Despite overwhelming opposition among educators and parents forcing retreats, such as providing free school meals over the summer and a delay in opening primary schools fully, the government has met no challenge from the union bureaucracies.

Mary Bousted of the National Education Union (NEU) responded to the leaked guidance document on Monday, stating there were still some days left for the union to “hope to influence the outcome.” Kevin Courtney, joint president with Bousted, pledged, “As

ever, the National Education Union is ready to talk with Government to find a way forward.”

The unions have in fact played a key role in “influencing the outcome” through suppressing and demobilising the mass opposition that exists to the reopening of schools. Some 1.6 million children are currently at school. There has never been a call to organise industrial action over unsafe working conditions.

Members of the NEU have continued to be critical of the union’s response. Emma stated, “Seeing as Hancock finally admitted children spread the virus, does the NEU not consider the lack of social distancing and PPE to be of massive concern? I don’t understand how adults in offices need to social distance, have perspex screens etc., yet school staff are expected to be in an enclosed classroom with no distancing or PPE at all?”

Dani said on Facebook, “The new proposals are now worse than the previous return to school proposals you [the NEU] were up in arms about, so what is the new plan of action to secure the safety of school staff because these new guidelines are putting teachers and school staff at more risk than they were at before.”

The unions have a plan of action: to control and demobilise opposition. The working class needs its own independent plan of action. The Socialist Equality Party proposes genuine measures to protect the lives and well-being of educators, children and the working class. We call for the formation of rank-and-file committees where workers take matters into their own hands and decide on health and safety issues. These committees must be the spearhead of a struggle to bring down the Johnson government. We urge all educators and families to study our programme of action.

To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>