

Jennifer Jones speaks on UK Boycott Return To Unsafe Schools campaign

By Tom Pearce
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Jennifer Jones is the Facebook administrator of the group Boycott Return To Unsafe Schools— #Boycottreturntounsafeschools. Tony Dadd, a former teacher, created the site at the beginning of May along with Gemma Sewell a parent of primary school and nursery age children.

Jennifer explained, “I got involved through a friend on Facebook in June. I was on my own in the house, isolated with my son who is usually in a special school, since a week before the lockdown began because I could see myself that it was not safe. I didn’t feel safe that final week before the lockdown continually sending him to school each day for him to have to disinfect his skin and wash his clothes every time”. Jennifer had experience in fighting government cuts in SEND (special educational needs and disabilities), as a member of Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC).

Since Jennifer joined Boycott Return To Unsafe Schools in June, the page’s influence has spread across the country, from the south up to North Yorkshire, with local community pages linking to the national page. The group believe that “people who have no option but to send their children to school deserve everybody’s support whether they are key workers or whether that is due to financial instability etc... but we think that if you can keep your child off school at the moment that you should.”

The site has created a map of school closures due to outbreaks of COVID-19, which is a powerful source of information for parents.

Jennifer said, “Schools are not safe at the moment and we’ve evidenced that with the map and all the outbreaks in schools. If you transpose the map we’ve made (and no one else has done this) you look at the outbreaks you then put them over the top of each other and it proves that they can’t keep this out of schools, it

correlates.”

Before schools open, “We need to make sure that the R [Reproduction rate] rate [of the virus] is nowhere near 1 and we need to make sure that the cases per day are much, much less.

“In the UK, sadly the number of deaths per day is still in triple figures most days, we have still got nearly 900 to a 1,000 in Britain dying per week and that is not acceptable. It needs to go down into single figures for the schools to be safe, otherwise it is just going to perpetuate. Sending in children from 20 to 40 households into one room means it’s just going to carry on—making schools into petri dishes like the care homes were. We can’t allow that to happen. We have to stand up against it.”

“There was a mixed reaction initially from parents to the site. When some people see the word ‘boycott’ they assume that it’s very hardline approach but then once people get talking on the page, then they realise the importance of what we are saying.”

The group now has over 4,000 members. It’s not just schools that are being discussed. People are talking about their home lives. In an absence of any support from the government, the site is taking on a role of supporting struggling families and their communities.

“We have created a support network. One parent who had never been involved before contacted us. She said her son was going to get an Education, Health and Care Plan [to determine what special needs assistance is needed from the local authority] before lockdown. But it hasn’t been started so she was left with no support for her disabled son. She had only been given a list of websites but because there was no plan then there was no additional support. Within 48 hours we had organised clothes and arts and crafts materials. This is also what our group is doing. We are a support network

that's grown and grown.

"We also discussed the government's plans for September. Firstly, the talk about no PPE [personal protective equipment] was shocking. We feel it is a dereliction of duty of care to the people that work in schools, all of you, of all people that work in schools at any level, and of our children.

"It is law to wear PPE on public transport where you have a low number of people, but not with a larger group [in schools] where people from a larger number of households are in an enclosed space. It is heart stopping. Just one person, adult or child, in that school could be carrying the virus and due to the way the government has designed the reopening schools, it is putting everybody at risk."

The reopening of schools has already increased outbreaks across the country, but the long-term damage will be immense. "Children haven't been affected so much so far. There's not been a huge number of deaths, but there have been children with infections and children have got the long-lasting effects of the nasty chest infection that won't go away. We can't forget 40 percent of kids that have special educational needs have got underlying conditions."

One of the most criminal measures announced by the Johnson government is fining parents who choose to keep their children at home. "They will be a factory worker, hotel worker, hospital worker, schoolteacher. It's going to be the working class that are affected. These are the people that are being threatened, the people who have nothing."

Jennifer sited a Scottish radio programme in which a government representative was asked about fining parents. He replied, "We will take it off their [welfare] benefits."

On the role of the trade unions in opposing any mobilisation against the reopening of schools, Jennifer said, "The only agenda we have is making sure schools are safe for kids and people who work with them. The local National Education Union [NEU] district secretary contacted me. He said could you take the word 'boycott' out of your campaign? I refused and he said, 'Well you know we have a bit of issue with you saying that schools aren't safe.' I replied that is what you are saying. We are saying the same thing.

"If the union had been more hard line, if they had started organising for strike action when it became

apparent that their [the government's] five tests weren't being met, would the government have pushed on with the reopening of bars, restaurants and shops? Would it have slowed the spread in places like Leicester? Boris Johnson is getting away with it."

Asked about Labour leader Sir Kier Starmer's response, Jennifer asked, "What response? There has been ample opportunity with Prime Ministers Question's but also with his own media channels that he's involved with. The Labour Party's focus is on restarting the economy, which must be done safely. But then doesn't say how. We have had mixed support from Labour and the Trades Union Congress, with only regional branches. That's not the leadership.

"But so many parents have joined us who have never so much as took a leaflet or waved a placard in their life. The power lies with millions of parents and it's up to the unions, political parties, and community groups, and anybody who cares actually that the kids and the people who work in schools have a right to be safe to get behind this campaign.

"The government are blinkered and too focused on making profits. They are so focused on that, but they're not looking at the wider picture. I do not think that they even consider people's lives, I don't think that they are capable of it. If you told the most evil person in the world to start a plan from scratch to make as many people as miserable and as in much danger as possible, they wouldn't come up with something as bad as this."

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