



# Britain: Tories could unleash a second wave by reopening schools

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As schools and colleges across the country reopen, the National Education Union (NEU) has accused Tory ministers of being 'negligent in the extreme'. The NEU argues that schools and colleges have been left in the dark on how to deal with a second wave of Covid-19 and that families are being let down because of a lack of robust track and trace system.

It has been a turbulent couple of weeks for the hapless education secretary Gavin Williamson following the A-level and GCSE grading fiasco. Kier Starmer warned the exams crisis put the planned reopening of schools 'at risk', but had earlier declared that he expects all children back at school this month regardless of the risks: 'no ifs, no buts, no equivocation'.

The Labour leader's stance alarmed many education workers who do not have confidence their classrooms are Covid-secure. Given the current UK prevalence of Covid-19, there is a significant risk that any given pupil or member of teaching staff who attends weekly face-to-face teaching events throughout the autumn term could catch the virus. Professor Neil Ferguson has predicted up to a 50% increase in the rate of infection if secondary schools fully reopen this autumn.

A succession of outbreaks in Germany and the recent outbreak at a school in Dundee highlight the potential role schools play in the community spread of the virus. There is still a lot we do not know about transmission of infection in schools but recent research suggests that aerosols are an effective means of transmission. This risk increases sharply the longer people remain together in enclosed spaces.

When the Government attempted to browbeat primary schools into reopening en masse in June, the education unions spoke out about the absence of proper preparation, resources and guidelines. Three months on there has been no progress and the 'world class' track and trace system never materialised from the private companies who made millions from the contract. Requests for confidence-building on-demand testing for pupils and teachers was turned down by the schools minister Nick Gibbs. This underpins the real fears that education staff, their unions, and parents have for a safe autumn term.

The likelihood of further lockdowns has also concerned teachers about the unrealistic expectations for next year's exams. The Government and Ofqual have made some minor changes to GCSEs and A-levels due to be taken in 2021, but Covid-19 will not be defeated in one fell swoop. The crass attempt to rig the exam results this year was not the first time that the exam system has been shown to institutionalise class bias. In 2012 predominantly BAME and working-class pupils received lower grades to avoid 'grade inflation'. The assessment process for GCSEs and A-levels requires a radical overhaul and exams should be scrapped. The failed exams system has changed over the past decade to focus on terminal examinations to the exclusion of all other forms of assessment. Continuous assessment has proven to be a far more effective method in developing the creative possibilities in every young person. Teacher assessments should continue play a significant role in grading.

There is likely to be a further turn to remote learning as this Government struggles to contain the virus. The move towards technology during the lockdown exposed the stark digital divide that exists in our schools and colleges. Learning continued but not all pupils could access it from home. Office for National Statistics (ONS) data published in

2019 tells us that around 700,000 children aged 11 to 18 in the UK disclosed having no internet access at home from a computer or tablet. In August it was reported that only one-third of disadvantaged children promised free laptops by Williamson in April had received them.

Boris Johnson has described the wholesale reopening of schools as an 'absolutely vital' step in the country's emergence from lockdown. The Government have threatened the use of fines if children do not return to the classroom. In a letter signed by 250 child and adolescent psychiatrists, they appeal to the government to drop fines and argue: 'This could have serious consequences on their mental health, especially if they are worried about family shielding. Fines could bring more financial stress on families as we're entering a recession, severely affecting children's and parents' mental health.'

The concerns expressed by Johnson over the priority for children to be back in school 'to bridge the gap of inequality' ring even more hollow in the wake of the Government taking away free school meals during the summer holidays and the downgrading of state school students' A-level results. The entire thrust of this policy is to get parents back in the workplace, not health and safety.

Starmer has also been a vocal cheerleader for big business during the lockdown and argued vociferously for schools to reopen against teachers' advice in June. The then shadow education secretary Rebecca Long-Bailey echoed the teaching unions' safety-first approach and was subsequently sacked by Starmer on the flimsiest of pretexts. The Labour leadership refused to back union calls for the wearing of masks in schools, but when the Government briefed the press that a U-turn was coming, the new shadow education secretary Kate Green rapidly changed tack. Labour have failed teachers and pupils on a safe return to schools.

Parents, students and the education unions should organise together to control health and safety inspections and measures to ensure safety in schools. Risk assessments should be individualised and updated regularly in consultation with the unions. We need a drastic reduction in class sizes to facilitate physical distancing and improved education. Regular testing is essential for identifying outbreaks and preventing the spread of the virus and we must continue to call for on-demand testing. Fundamentally, parents, students and teachers should organise to close schools where their safety concerns are not addressed. Education unions must be prepared to support members who refuse to work in unsafe conditions.

Socialists in the trade unions and the Labour Party should make the case for a public health approach to a public health crisis. They should support the demand for extending the furlough and eviction ban, cancelling the rent debt, workers' control over working conditions and no fines for concerned carers and parents. Our communities do not need a dangerously premature return to face-to-face teaching without proper safety measures: they need a nationally coordinated response to Covid-19 that puts people before profit.

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