Schools in England: a safe return in September?

Emergency Advisory Group for Learning and Education (EAGLE)

The authors

This initiative begun when, in May 2020, the medical scientists in Independent SAGE asked four education specialists for assistance in writing their report on schools:

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The group has since grown to 20, with a mixture of academic researchers, teachers, headteachers and local government officers, to form the Emergency Advisory Group for Learning and Education (EAGLE). Academic research partners include:

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Like Independent SAGE, our aim is to provide knowledgeable advice based on secure evidence, independent of government or political parties.

Executive summary

This report considers a range of issues surrounding the wider reopening of schools in England in September, including difficulties arising from the Government's document of 2 July Guidance for full opening - schools. Our aim is to make a return to school healthy and sustainable.

Our major argument is that schools will need flexibility in order to welcome all their students back safely, including funding for smaller classes in primary schools and a combination of on-site and distance learning in many secondary schools. Movement around secondary school buildings, and the mixing of students between classes, presents a real challenge, and we make suggestions on how this could be ameliorated. This report provides ideas on how all students could enjoy a full and satisfying education, whilst emphasising that decisions can only be taken locally, given factors such as the layout of school buildings.

This report emphasises the central importance of wellbeing, and the need to avoid a rush to "catch up”. It points to the danger of primary school tests distorting the work of teachers and argues for their removal for 2020-21. It also proposes that coursework should be re-integrated into GCSEs to make assessment more resilient against future outbreaks.

Other recommendations include:

1) Urgent improvement in communicating medical information to local authorities and school governors, to facilitate sound decision making.
2) The need for sensitivity and care in re-engaging young people, without the threat of fines.

3) Ensure universal access to distance learning, through a fund to provide laptops and internet access for all students with free school meals entitlement.

4) Increase the funding of tutorial support for students who have encountered the greater barriers to learning, and route this through schools to ensure that it is in tune with individual needs.

**Context and purpose**

Independent SAGE, a body of scientists with substantial expertise, undertook in May 2020 to assess the situation of prolonged school closures and the prospects for reopening. Their report *When Should a School Reopen?* concluded that the government's insistence on 1 June was premature because the number of infections and the reproduction rate were still high and test, track and isolate programmes were not running effectively. A small group of experienced education researchers produced a note that informed this report. The education group has since had further meetings, involving a larger number of researchers as well as experienced educational professionals (teachers, headteachers, local authority officers). This note attempts to summarise the issues arising from these discussions, in the context of empirical data, available medical knowledge, educational research and standard school practices in England. It has some relevance to other parts of the UK, but it is useful to consider England separately, given different infection patterns and school characteristics.

The aim of this report is to consider how the interests of children and young people can best be served. It was begun before the 2 July *Guidance for full opening - schools* but includes specific comments on that document. Whilst we believe that schools should open to all students as fully as possible in September, we do not believe the government's position is realistic, and aim to present some more practical alternatives.

Our argument is that schools will need flexibility in order to welcome all their students back in September, including funding for smaller classes (particularly in primary schools) and a combination of on-site and distance learning in many secondary schools. This report outlines some ways in which this could happen, whilst emphasising that decisions can only be taken locally because of the

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2 Annexe, pages 34-40 of (1)
4 The term 'student' is used for convenience throughout the document to refer to children and young people of all ages.
particular characteristics of each school's student population, curriculum and buildings. Our aim is to make a return to school healthy and sustainable.

We ask for a resounding national gratitude for the extremely hard work of everyone working in schools over the last few months. It has not just been about teaching and learning, important though this is. COVID-19 has made clear once more the crucial role of schools in terms of the whole community. Schools became a key focus for many crucial issues such as families having enough to eat, safeguarding concerns, planning summer activities and much more.

The report argues that wellbeing and learning are interrelated. A lack of attention to children's social, emotional and mental health will undermine effective education. We also believe that active and engaged forms of learning can have a significant impact on children and young people's enjoyment and wellbeing. This will not be helped by returning to the pressures of formal assessment and inspection. A narrow emphasis on 'catching up' is likely to be counterproductive. Rather than a return to 'normal', this situation provides opportunities to take stock and build a more satisfying and engaging education for children and young people.5

Scientific advice on transmission involving students

Serious concerns were raised by the medical scientists in Independent SAGE (28 May)6 because infections were still high and test-track-and-trace had scarcely begun. It was also not known whether children, including those not / not yet showing symptoms, could transmit the virus to adults or other children.

Although the pandemic is no longer as intense, there are ongoing problems with test-and-trace and data sharing. This is well illustrated by the recent outbreak in Leicester: local officials were only informed of the 71 'pillar 1' cases (tests at hospitals) but not the 873 'pillar 2' cases7 (i.e. commercial laboratories that process at-home and drive-through tests).8 The Director of Education complained

5 see for example https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/05/our-school-systems-are-broken-lets-grab-this-chance-to-remake-them
6 as (1)
that he had not been told the age of the infected children, so was unable to intervene appropriately.  

This demonstrates the systemic undermining of public health in England, a service which has been made even more incoherent in recent months by outsourcing testing to private companies lacking relevant experience. As medical researchers explain, this has resulted in serious inadequacies in the analysis and transfer of data to doctors and local authorities.  

Although local authorities are now being supplied with Pillar 2 data online, local authorities are still not receiving adequate details of new outbreaks. The Local Government Association (3 July) have pointed out that confidential communication of details of postcodes, home addresses and workplaces / schools is essential if local government officers and medical professionals are to prevent local outbreaks escalating.

Whether children can spread the virus is still uncertain, with conflicting medical research. Indeed, health secretary Matt Hancock has justified the decision to close Leicester schools by asserting that they do. This justifies the caution of Independent SAGE, the National Education Union, many local authorities, governing bodies and parents towards the government’s earlier decision that schools had to open from 1 June.

Government advice is currently incoherent. The Department of Education’s key document of 2 July contains very strong warnings from Public Health England followed by pragmatic guidelines on how to organise schools with full-time attendance of all students. Many schools will find it impossible to follow the organisational guidance without breaching the health warnings. The contradictions are particularly strong for secondary schools, as we explain below.

We welcome the thorough and detailed explanation on preventing infections contained in section 1, derived from Public Health England, but do not believe many of them can be achieved given the limited physical and human resources of most state schools whilst attempting to provide for full-time attendance for all students.

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9 https://schoolsweek.co.uk/leicesters-covid-19-response-thwarted-by-poor-data/?mc_cid=f8510837d9&mc_eid=7ecb3b7756
10 Peter Roderick, Alison Macfarlane and Allyson Pollock: Getting back on track - control of covid-19 outbreaks in the community (BMJ 26 June 2020) https://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/369/bmj.m2484.full.pdf
11 LGA: Coronavirus - LGA responds to publication of Pillar 2 testing data (3 July 2020) https://www.local.gov.uk/coronavirus-lga-responds-publication-pillar-2-testing-data
12 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leicestershire-53261339
13 see note (3)
Recommendations:

1) Government, and decision-making bodies such as school governors, local authorities and academy trusts, should make it clear that health and safety is paramount over the desire to provide for full-time school attendance for all students.

2) Further exploration is needed of forms of blended learning in the school context, involving a suitable mix of on-site and home learning, for those schools which are unable to provide for full-time attendance safely. There is a need to learn from what schools have been doing over the last few months and publicise case studies of best practice.

3) A reliable Test-Track-Trace system with full involvement of public health departments is essential for schools to operate safely. The system for data sharing about local outbreaks to schools must be clarified, as well as the channels for schools to obtain help from public health bodies.

The impact of school closure on students: a summary

Wellbeing

Studies of earlier pandemics provide evidence of the psychological impact of quarantine\(^\text{14}\), including the need for extra support for people with pre-existing poor mental health\(^\text{15}\). Indications quickly emerged that the Covid-19 outbreak and lockdown was impacting on mental health of students and families in various ways\(^\text{16}\) though for some there was a sense of relief at escaping problematic situations at school\(^\text{17}\).

While adults can be persuaded of the mutual and altruistic benefits of physical distancing and other measures, it is possible that children and adolescents will feel more acutely disempowered due to the way the instructions about lock-down were received. Many schools closed down very rapidly, before young people had an adequate chance to say good-bye to friends, which was particularly significant for those in transition to secondary, further or higher education. Moreover, adults tend to set the agendas in homes and where there is poor communication, children and adolescents may experience a lack of control.

\(^{14}\) (Alverez, et al. 2005; Cukor et al. 2011)
\(^{15}\) (Brooks et al, 2020, p. 917)
\(^{17}\) [https://www.leedstrinity.ac.uk/blog/blog-posts/exam-factory-spring-a-lockdown-reflection.php](https://www.leedstrinity.ac.uk/blog/blog-posts/exam-factory-spring-a-lockdown-reflection.php)
Schools and families need to be supported to put the social, emotional and health needs of students first, as a moral imperative and as a foundation for progression with learning. We know from teacher’s experience with more students returned to school that students of all ages will need time to get back into learning dispositions and behaviours, such as coping with sitting in a classroom and the pattern of a school day. Where individual and collective healing needs to happen, the starting point is to meet students where they are, as they return to school, helping them to take proper account of these experiences: it will not be ‘back to normal’ for many of them, or for their teachers and families.

**School achievement, poverty and disadvantage**

Covid-19 related death rates reveal place-based (inner-city urban, rural) patterns relating to poverty. Those living in overcrowded housing, in multi-generational households or care homes have been more at risk of infection. The death rate among BAME groups is over twice that of white British groups and most of these deaths occur in major conurbations such as inner London, Birmingham and Liverpool. It has been poverty and population density, rather than NHS capacity, which has resulted in high death rates. Some of this has been related to government austerity cuts. Students from these environments are more likely to return to school in September having suffered bereavement, as well as anxiety about the risks to their friends and families. This is in addition to the increased mental health risk for students growing up in poverty.

Many students will have fallen behind in their learning during this extended period of school closures, although home learning has worked well for some. Research has consistently shown that the most economically disadvantaged students tend to have the poorest educational outcomes, even without schools being closed. Despite frequent government claims to be 'closing the gap', research has shown that, at the current rate of progress, this would take 50 years. even without

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schools being closed. Despite frequent government claims to be 'closing the gap', research has shown that, at the current rate of progress, this would take 50 years.

It is a matter of great concern, therefore, that the poorest students have encountered additional barriers to learning in recent months. However, we believe the problems cannot be solved by a 'business as usual' response, and require acknowledgment of structural roots of disadvantage, and actions to prevent child poverty and reduce its educational impact such as through poverty proofing of the school day (See the section "Conditions and challenges for reopening" below.)

Teachers and heads (and other school-based professionals) are in an excellent position to analyse needs, provide schools with direct access to funding and resources, for example to ensure equitable access to appropriate technology for home learning. Students themselves are also in an excellent position to inform others of their needs and greater opportunity needs to be found for the voice of the student without reliance on questionnaire surveys that are not accessible to all.

Recommendations

1) Schools should be encouraged to prioritise the mental and physical health and wellbeing of children, and consider the full implications of providing a 'recovery curriculum'.

2) Policy makers, school professionals and workers, and students should work with education researchers to make a thorough assessment of the differential effects of school closures, and the complex impact on students who were already indicated as disadvantaged.

3) Because teachers and heads are in a better position to analyse needs, schools should be given direct access to funding and resources, for example to ensure equitable access to appropriate technology for home learning.

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24 [https://cpag.org.uk/projects/cost-school-day](https://cpag.org.uk/projects/cost-school-day) and [https://www.children-ne.org.uk/poverty-proofing-the-school-day](https://www.children-ne.org.uk/poverty-proofing-the-school-day)

25 [https://www.evidenceforlearning.net/recoverycurriculum/](https://www.evidenceforlearning.net/recoverycurriculum/)
Government policy and media emphasis

The major emphasis from government and the media has been on the losses to academic learning, accompanied by pressure to resume full time schooling. Part of the motivation is the economic pressure for parents to return to work. Many teachers have shown greater insight into the experiences of children, the need to re-engage them, and the futility of a race to 'catch up' what has been missed.

Gradually the media have become more aware of these broader issues, and they are reflected to some extent in the DfE advice of 2 July.

Considerable blame has been directed at teacher organisations, particularly the NEU, for resisting the 1 June target, yet schools could have been in a better position to receive students earlier if public health arrangements had been better. The Leicester outbreak is an indication that the flow of information needs considerable improvement, especially communications with schools.

What has been absent and is of great importance is the need for public recognition of the dedication, professionalism and service to society that all those working in schools since the outbreak of COVID-19. There has been too little gratitude expressed, and too little emphasis on building trust and cooperation between decision-makers, professionals and parents during this crisis. These are essential if a wider reopening of schools is to work. There is also a need to learn from the best examples from how both individual teachers and whole schools have operated since COVID-19 and this is essential if we are to prepare for further possible lockdowns in the future.

Recommendations:

1) A campaign of national and public recognition for those in schools since COVID-19.

2) There is an urgent need to improve the flow of information on new infections to schools to aid local decision making.

2) Better planning is needed to build a more resilient society and environment if new outbreaks of Covid-19 or other infections occur, including safe physical spaces and social activities for families in overcrowded conditions or without gardens.

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26 See for example the 19 June press briefing from the Secretary of State for Education.

27 See for example Matthew Evans https://educontrarianblog.com/2020/06/04/knee-jerk-ill-informed-catch-up-plans/ and Aidan Severs http://www.thatboycanteach.co.uk/2020/06/back-to-school-recovery-or-catch-up.html

28 see note 3

29 https://www.ncl.ac.uk/press/articles/latest/2020/03/playingout/

https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/alisonstenning/
Conditions and challenges for reopening

This section considers in more detail steps which should be considered to improve readiness for a wider reopening of schools.

Preventing the spread of infections

Medical scientists and education unions have pointed to the high level of infections and the inadequacies of test-and-trace as creating dangers for staff, students and their families. The government's initial response, inspired by countries such as Denmark\(^{30}\) which had reopened earlier, was to propose distancing and 'bubbles', with fewer than 15 in each room. This failed to recognise the difficulties arising from much larger classes in English primary schools, for example, or the fact that children start school here earlier and many of the youngest children would be unable to comply with distancing. Moreover, the separation of students into 'bubbles' within school is negated if they travel together to and from school by bus or even mingle outside the school gates.

That position has largely been abandoned, and the Secretary of State for Education is currently insisting on full classes, and suggesting that 'bubbles' in secondary schools can consist of the entire year group (often 180 or 240 students). This is clearly a dangerous proposal; it allows far too many opportunities for infection to spread and would make tracing the course of infections almost impossible. Worse, the real 'bubble' is likely to be the whole school, given siblings in others years, bus travel to and from school, lunches and toilet visits.\(^{31}\) Some alternatives are considered below.

The urgency of 'catching up'

Various attempts have been made to forecast the learning loss of students, but this is highly problematic. The US Brookings Institute, for example, based its forecasts on summer vacation 'learning loss', which does not recognise that home learning has taken place during lockdown.\(^{32}\) There may also have been some gains: one survey showed that, although many learners miss the interaction and social environment of school, some also appreciated a more flexible work pattern and high-quality online resources.\(^{33}\)

It seems likely, however, that relative advantage and disadvantage will have been exacerbated. In other words, the learning loss will have been minimal among students with good internet access,
distance learning resources from school, and support from well educated parents. Students growing up in poverty are likely to have fallen even further behind than if they had been at school.

A study by Professor Francis Green (UCL Institute of Education) showed that home learning had diminished, during the lockdown, to an average of 2.5 hours a day, with a fifth of students doing less than an hour a day.34 It should not be assumed, however, that these differences in study time map automatically onto socioeconomic differences: only 11 per cent of students on free school meals were spending more than four hours a day on schoolwork but also only 19 per cent of other students.

As argued elsewhere in this document, there has to be a broad understanding of what students will need as they return to school but clearly support for studying the academic curriculum must be taken very seriously. Although we have reservations about the notion of 'catch up' (catch up with what or who? in pursuing which aim? in which area of learning?), it is clear that many students will have missed out on some important learning in recent months. What steps need to be taken?

Firstly the fund for tutorial support is valuable, though the promised budget is limited even if only spread among students with the greatest needs. It will provide far less tuition, for example, than many better off parents buy to prepare children for 11 plus tests or GCSEs.35 Moreover, a third of the funding will not be distributed directly to schools but to national organisations favoured by the government. There is a danger that large providers will not meet local needs. There are also dangers that the tutors they hire may not be of sufficiently high quality; they will not know the students they are supporting or the curriculum in their schools.

The need for individual tuition must also be set against the larger class sizes in England compared with elsewhere: an average of 27 in English primary schools compared with the European average of 20. Independent schools in England have half as many students per teacher as state schools.36

There is potential for employing more teachers to ensure smaller classes and enabling some physical distancing. There are at present more than 250,000 people under 60 with a teaching qualification who are not working in schools. However, many have left because classes are too large, the curriculum is not engaging young people, or because they found top-down surveillance in the English school system unacceptable; many might return if conditions were more favourable. As the

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34 https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2020/jun/children-doing-25-hours-schoolwork-day-average
Independent SAGE report suggested, schools can also facilitate safe distancing by hiring spaces in community centres, church halls and so on.

**Curriculum**

Initially advice from ministers was to concentrate on literacy and numeracy (English and Maths) at the expense of other subjects. This advice contradicted a widespread concern about curriculum narrowing, including from Ofsted, and has now changed. The document of 2 July 'Guidance for full opening - schools' quite rightly emphasises a 'broad and ambitious curriculum'. It says students should be able to study the full range of subjects at KS3 and all their expected KS4 or post-16 subjects. It also recognises that an additional emphasis on reading, for example, across different curriculum subjects will help students recover lost ground.

At the same time, the advice assumes that curriculum is simply defined by official lists of knowledge. In our view, a 'recovery curriculum' should not only involve time for social and emotional care but also ensure re-engagement of students' interests and their concerns for the world they are growing up in. This is an essential part of developing knowledge in a deeper sense than the memorisation of inert facts. Students need to be re-engaged through active and creative learning in art, drama or sport, for example. Some of those currently unable to work in the creative arts and performance industries might be able to support learning temporarily, to facilitate smaller classes and social distancing.

It is arguable that switching to home learning in March was more challenging because recent curriculum policy in England has emphasised direct instruction and passive learning. Many students couldn't cope when suddenly expected to learn more independently. A greater emphasis in the future on sustained individual and small group work would have many advantages, including less need to sit in crowded classrooms and the development of initiative and commitment. It would also make any sudden closures more manageable.

One important way of developing students' engagement in learning, common in other European countries, is through well organised investigative projects. This kind of learning is relevant for

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38 https://bigeducation.org/lfl-content/metamorphosis-using-re-entry-as-a-springboard-for-helping-vulnerable-primary-school-pupils-fly/
39 see Creative Partnerships https://www.creativitycultureeducation.org/programme/creative-partnerships/
students of all ages, and rewarded in the International Baccalaureate and other qualifications such as the A-level Extended Project Qualification. Projects should not be seen as isolated individual activity: a well planned project begins with teachers discovering and stimulating children’s interests, finding what they know already, and agreeing with individuals or small groups a plan for more specific investigation in coming weeks. The final stage involves individuals and groups presenting their findings to the class and receiving feedback to correct misunderstandings. Research shows positive outcomes for children’s learning and development of ‘skills for the future’, including responsibility, independence, discipline and motivation as well as improved academic results.\textsuperscript{42}

This form of work is valuable in itself, as a way of learning, but would also give the curriculum resilience in case of lockdown and could be pursued in situations of part-time attendance. Projects can spread across a group of subjects, if the theme is well chosen, with many opportunities for out of school learning.

Assessment and accountability

The document of 2 July\textsuperscript{43} places an important emphasis on planning on the basis of the educational needs of students, informed by "an assessment of students' starting points and addressing the gaps in their knowledge and skills". It suggests use of informal observation and questioning, and issues a salutary warning against "unnecessary tracking systems".

However it does not tackle with sufficient urgency the difficulties for current Year 10 students of preparing for GCSEs which place a lot of emphasis on covering all the material, memorisation and second-guessing possible exam questions. Problems arose for current Year 11 students when the exams were abandoned and they had to be assessed on the basis of their work during the year: there wasn't a ready stock of evidence because coursework had been virtually eliminated from GCSEs. Government policy in recent years has led to a virtual elimination of coursework from GCSEs. The education system will be more balanced and resilient when the value of coursework is accepted once more; in the event of future school closures, teachers will have a body of evidence on which to base professional judgements. There is an urgent need for a decision for 2021 GCSEs.

The same is true for primary school KS2 tests. The government has a chance to change direction and to remedy a situation which has caused widespread dissatisfaction. Better forms of assessment are available. For example, a portfolio, selected by the student with guidance from teachers, would provide richer and more reliable information for parents and future secondary school teachers than a score or grade in a test does at present. Unfortunately, although it has delayed the Baseline test

\footnote{42}{see Bell, 2010 \url{https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00098650903505415}}
\footnote{43}{see note (3)}
for the start of Reception, the document of 2 July\textsuperscript{44} insists on the full battery of primary school tests (phonics, KS1, Y4 multiplication tables, and KS2 tests and teacher assessment). This will continue to distort primary education and undermine recovery. For both primary and secondary education, the focus on accountability in core subjects undermines the 2 July guidance advocating a ‘broad and ambitious’ curriculum cited earlier: with a sense of ‘lost’ time, schools will be compelled to focus on what is measured. Whatever one’s views on primary school testing in general, it would be wise to cancel the tests for 2020-21.

One unforeseen benefit of school closures has been the halt to Ofsted inspections. Ironically, Ofsted appear to have stopped operations altogether, and despite the importance of monitoring safeguarding, the organisation’s inspectors appear not to be investigating, even on a sample basis, issues such as whether schools are losing contact with more vulnerable students. The Chief Inspector has not commented, for example, on the non-delivery of promised laptops, the impact of lack of access to the internet, or the quality of the distance learning resources available. If Ofsted has any future, it must be based on ‘thematic reviews’ to evaluate and offer guidance on national provision based on a research sample rather than ‘hit-and-run’ visits to schools. A first step has been taken by focusing, for the autumn, on a thematic review of distance learning and the return to school across the country, based on sample visits, rather than grading individual schools. There is enormous potential for sharing effective practices for the benefit of all schools through detailed independent investigations.

**Primary schools**

Classes in England's primary schools are larger than almost anywhere in Europe. The average class size here is 27, compared with a European average of 20. When schools in Denmark reopened, in a situation with less infection than England now, children were taught in classes of 10-15.\textsuperscript{45} With suitable government investment, that could happen here, and would help create a world-class education system. In the short term, there are circumstances in which a class could be shared between a teacher and experienced teaching assistant in adjacent rooms, but efforts should be made to encourage qualified teachers back into schools, with suitable budgetary increases.

\textsuperscript{44} see note (3)
\textsuperscript{45} \url{https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-52550470}
There are good educational and safety reasons why students should remain with their class, rather than being redistributed into different classes for literacy or numeracy - a recent practice which is almost unknown in other countries.

Younger children will have missed out on exploratory and play-based learning in nurseries. Primary schools will need to adjust by sustaining an early years approach rather than rushing into more formal teaching. Finally, there are considerable educational and health benefits in children spending more time learning outdoors.

We are starting to know what students and parents have valued over lockdown\(^46\). We know that communication with school and with individual teachers has been highly appreciated, that in some cases this has been easier that schools expected with families they thought might not engage. Children have loved videos of their teachers reading books. Not enough is known about best practice of individual teachers or of the strategies of schools that has worked well. Research is needed to gather this evidence and this is crucial to best prepare for further lockdowns in the future.

**Secondary schools**

The particular difficulties of opening secondary schools during a pandemic was raised in the Independent SAGE report\(^47\) at the end of May:

> There are also particular features of English secondary schools which will make a return to school more difficult. Pupils are frequently allocated to different sets (ability groups) for specific subjects, and between different subject options in Years 10 and 11 (often starting in Year 9). By contrast, a common core curriculum is the norm in many European countries, with less subject choice.

It is the failure to think beyond this pattern that has now led the Secretary of State for Education to propose "bubbles" consisting of the entire year group.

The Independent SAGE report\(^48\) included, as an initial suggestion, that:

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\(^ {47}\) see note (1)

\(^ {48}\) see note (1)
New arrangements will need to be carefully planned, so that pupils remain together with one teacher in a class of 15 or fewer. They might have to be taught by a single subject teacher for several days, supplemented by distance learning with other subject specialists.

This is only one of a number of possibilities, and was written at a time when the virus was much more prevalent. Such a dramatic change in organisational norms may still be necessary in areas where there are serious outbreaks, as an alternative to avoid complete closure. More open-minded discussion of alternative ways of conducting secondary education is urgently needed given the government's drive to have all students in school in September. Without pretending to offer a specific model, which would depend on the physical layout of the school and many other factors, the following points give some indicators and possibilities.

Firstly however, it is important to recognise the tension between the infection control advice in the 2 July document (particularly section 1), derived from Public Health England, and the DfE’s advice for organising schools and the curriculum (especially sections 2 and 3). The groups of headteachers we have heard from are already reaching the conclusion that they can either follow the former or the latter, but cannot reconcile both.

Secondly, it is apparent that the document’s proposals for reorganising schools and curriculum are undermined by the physical problems of movement between lessons, for lunch time, access to toilets and handwashing facilities, and walking or transport to and from school. In many schools, one or more of these factors presents a serious obstacle to safe opening with full attendance.

In the light of these factors, it seems likely that most secondary schools will need some combination of on-site and distance learning. Few schools will be able to accommodate all their students full-time whilst complying with Public Health England advice as contained in the DfE document of 2 July.

The following points are intended to suggest some ways of organising the curriculum which might enable secondary schools to operate safely.

1) ‘Bubbles’ of 180 or 240 have a high risk of infections spreading and would make tracing the source almost impossible. This can be reduced somewhat by dividing year groups into two or three parts.

2) The layout of many schools means that students in different 'bubbles' would have to pass close to each other through narrow corridors or stairs on the way to specialist accommodation (science, arts, PE etc). This problem could be avoided by timetabling subjects in half-day sessions rather than 40 or 60 minutes.

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49 see note (3)
3) Pressure could be relieved by agreeing to home-based distance learning for some half-days each week. Those students needing additional learning support, including many with SEND or students who have been unable to study at home, could be provided with tutorials or small group learning support at school during these half days.

4) Many schools will not be able to accommodate students safely at lunch time, with cleansing as recommended in the DfE statement of 2 July. A longer break between morning and afternoon sessions would allow those living nearby to eat at home, if that is possible, especially those required to be at school for only the morning or afternoon session.

5) Many schools have a carousel arrangement for some subjects in KS3, for example in creative arts each class is taught music, art and drama in different school terms. This has certain educational advantages and would make schools safer by reducing movement.

6) Redistributing classes into ability sets for different subjects adds to the amount of movement. Where this cannot be avoided, these subjects should be taught in blocks on particular half days, as suggested earlier.

7) The DfE document recommends that KS4 and KS5 students should generally study the normal range of GCSE or A-level subjects. Movement between subject options creates particular difficulties, but these can also be avoided by using half-day blocks in conjunction with distance learning.

We are aware that other solutions will emerge, and that their viability is dependent on the physical layout and human resources of each individual school. We also recognise that major curricular reorganisations take time to plan. However, this level of reorganisation may be the only way in which all secondary school students can enjoy a full curriculum while Covid remains a risk.

**Distance learning**

Better use of distance learning to support revision and homework when schools are open would be of benefit in itself, but would also help establish habits of independent learning in case of closure.

The recommendation in the DfE document of 2 July that schools should continue to prepare for distance learning is sound though very demanding of teachers working full time. The sudden switch to distance learning in mid March was exceptionally difficult, and teachers had to identify at great speed a range of available resources. It is to the credit of thousands of teachers that they were able to rise to the challenge and achieve this. They were helped in this by subject associations, for example. Although many commercial organisations offered free use of their online resources, much

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50 see note (3)
of this material was narrowly focused on practice exercises in English and Maths, for example arithmetic calculations and spellings. Although this has value, it should not be allowed to exacerbate the imbalance already existing in the English primary curriculum.

Notwithstanding the achievements of most teacher and schools, there are some schools where the quality of communication with students and the provision of on-line learning opportunities for students has been poor. It is essential to begin a broad consultation about expectations, best practice, skill requirements etc in terms of what counts as good practice.

The lack of a computer has been a major difficulty for many children, with deliveries of promised machines coming very late if at all. New figures show that of the 230,000 laptops promised ten weeks earlier (mid April), only 202,212 had been delivered or dispatched by 30 June, and nearly a quarter were sent out only in the last week.\(^{51}\) Many of these have not yet got beyond delivery to local authorities or academy trusts to reach schools and students. These delays might have been avoided if funding had gone directly to schools. It should be noted that the scheme does not cover the cost of internet access, and apart from care leavers and families with a social worker, only reaches disadvantaged students if they are in Year 10. The Prime Minister has refused to commit to free laptops for all students on free school meals.\(^{52}\)

A survey conducted in June by Professor Francis Green (UCL Institute of Education)\(^{53}\) showed that 20 per cent of students on free school meals had no computer access at home. It also revealed that private schools were able to use their superior resources to advantage.

This leaves a very poor basis for any future lockdown, or for schools which do not have the space for all students to attend full time and therefore need some mix of attendance and home learning.

Other ways of supporting education through distance learning have remained rudimentary. For example, BBC broadcasts were based largely on short video clips produced nearly 20 years ago. More interesting material including the TedEd collection\(^{54}\) with many thought-provoking videos and tasks did not align well with the narrower view of education of the English National Curriculum.

**Recommendations**

1) Reduce as far as possible the mixing of students beyond a small 'bubble', including smaller classes in primary schools and a different timetabling model in secondary schools.

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\(^{54}\) ed.ted.com
2) Increase funding for individual and small group tuition for students with additional needs.

3) Improve the quality of resources for distance learning, both when schools are open to all students and in case of any future restrictions, and with particular attention to students with underlying health conditions.

4) Ensure a 'broad and challenging' curriculum, as advised by the DfE, paying attention to the need to engage young people's interests and concerns and develop more independence and initiative.

5) Reduce the size of classes in primary school to around 15, by encouraging qualified teachers back into schools.

6) Devise alternative forms of curricular organisation for secondary schools which reduce movement whilst providing a high quality of education, including a mixture between on-site and home learning where necessary.

7) Work with employers and further and higher education to ensure this year's school leavers are not disadvantaged in relation to entry requirements and communicate this clearly into schools to reduce anxiety.

8) Reduce the pressures created by public examinations and primary school tests, including reduced content for GCSEs, greater use of coursework and portfolios, and cancelling universal national testing in primary schools.

9) Ensure that all disadvantaged students, not only those in examination years, and those vulnerable through health conditions, have access to computers and internet at home.

10) Encourage headteachers to share their knowledge and experience to develop guidance for different levels of alert in the future, including the health and education needs of vulnerable students.

Wellbeing: the challenges of a return to school

The complexity and variability of students' responses to the sudden closure of schools cannot be underestimated. A study by Barry Carpenter (Professor of Mental Health in Education at Oxford Brookes University) and Matthew Carpenter (Principal, Baxter College Kidderminster) points to the loss of self-esteem and self-image when the peer group is taken away, and in some cases this could

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trigger a bereavement response. Anxiety could arise from listening to daily reports of the spread of the pandemic and the death toll\(^{56}\) and many have had direct experience of bereavement or trauma in their families.

Mary Myatt (education consultant) emphasises the importance of 'recovery conversations' both among staff and with students - conversations in which personal narratives are expressed and shared, acknowledging a common experience.\(^{57}\) We should remember, of course, that not all students have had a negative experience or reactions since many have enjoyed time with family and may have been released from school-based anxieties.

A report by Childline\(^{58}\) as early as mid April identified the following range of issues for the students most seriously affected by school closures and lockdown:

*Mental health issues:* depression, anxiety, increase of panic attacks, sleeping problems and feeling isolated, lonely and trapped; for some, dark thoughts and self harm are connected with coronavirus; for some, mental health support has reduced or stopped which has worsened their mental health, or they are in hospital without visitors;

*Family relationships:* more stressful home environment, arguments, removal of refuge with grandparents or friends, anxiety about vulnerable family members;

*Schoolwork:* many aspects of the lockdown have made learning harder - family arguments about schoolwork, difficulty of accessing learning support leading to confusion and stress, difficulty of finding a quiet place to study and the challenge of self-motivating; students are worried about their future;

*Bullying:* in the early days of the pandemic, students were bullied about race or ethnicity and blamed for the virus spreading and although this has died down, it may have a legacy;

*Abuse:* where confined to home, students have no access to usual means of support, including school, clubs and relatives, and report physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect.

We should not make too casual use of terms such as trauma or Adverse Childhood Experiences, which can result in a negative categorisation of children. However, we should not underestimate the suffering of different children in recent months. Some will have lost relatives or dealt with relatives

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\(^{56}\) [https://www.evidenceforlearning.net/recoverycurriculum/](https://www.evidenceforlearning.net/recoverycurriculum/)

\(^{57}\) [https://schoolsweek.co.uk/a-recovery-curriculum-or-recovery-conversations/](https://schoolsweek.co.uk/a-recovery-curriculum-or-recovery-conversations/)

being seriously ill. Others will have been locked down in dysfunctional families. Both of those definitely rank as trauma.

On the other hand, some students will have experienced a release of stress, due to being able to learn in nurturing homes with parents on furlough who are maybe better able to support their needs than schools, due to adult-child relationships and ratios. Other students will have been reasonably happy at home but will have been with adults who are too busy trying to keep their careers ticking over through online working and don’t have much time to pay much attention to what the children are doing. Some will be generally happy at home but missing their friends. These different experiences and stories need to be heard and acknowledged by trusted teachers. The value of creativity in addressing and alleviating some of these concerns is well established. 59

The danger that some students will not return to school in September is recognised by DfE. There are various possible reasons for this. Some families with medically vulnerable members will fear infection. Some students may have become completely disconnected from their schools and some schools may not have monitored or remedied this well enough. Others may be afraid they have fallen too far behind. Some students with Special Educational Needs may not have had suitable support and may experience additional difficulties in returning to school. These different situations need to be handled sensitively. The threat of fines and prosecution is unhelpful.

Recommendations

1) Support parents and guardians in looking after students' mental wellbeing, including recognising and responding to stress / trauma and building resilience.

2) Provide guidance and training to school staff on how to support students who have suffered bereavement, stress or challenging situations at home. 60

3) Fund creative programmes and projects inside and out of school that address wellbeing and build relationships in positive and enjoyable ways.

4) Remove the threat of fines and prosecution.

60 see Chartered College of Teaching report https://my.chartered.college/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CCTReport150520_FINAL.pdf
Taking care of teachers:

Teachers, heads and other school staff have experienced extraordinary pressures in recent months, regardless of whether they have been keeping schools open for vulnerable students, partially reopening them, or supporting distance learning from home. Uncertainty itself has been incredibly stressful. Thought needs to be given to the kind of support they will need in preparing for a more extensive reopening in September.

Firstly they need to be congratulated for their work and supported to recognise the stress of their own time in lockdown and the difficulties of working online and remotely, while preparing to support students. Covid has created challenges for teachers and teacher assistants as they try to negotiate the different phases of the emergence from lockdown and the different educational and health and wellbeing needs of the students. For example, under stressful conditions, teachers undergo something akin to an identity passage where many cherished aspects of the teacher’s self become dislocated. Earlier research into teachers retiring has identified a sense of disorientation, what Nias described as grieving for their lost selves before they gradually relocate and modify their teacher identity. As they return to classroom teaching many will have gained insights into students' distress through online interactions delivering resources to homes and seeing the home conditions of families living in poverty. Some of this may feel overbearing and undermine a sense of professional competence. The importance of mutual support needs to be recognised, and some staff will need professional counselling.

Headteachers have been placed under considerable strain when facing government demands for schools to reopen quickly which at the same time placed the burden of responsibility on the headteacher and governors for ensuring this is safe. In many areas, local authorities have been run down so seriously that they have received little support. Headteachers and governors have experienced the frustration of not having the money to provide what they know is needed, while acute concerns for care and safeguarding as well as learning of their students have never gone away. These issues are exacerbated in disadvantaged catchments and run through holidays as well as term time.

This tension will be repeated in preparing for a wider reopening in September, and responding to the multiple demands of the DfE statement of 2 July. Headteachers need to be trusted, listened to and allowed to do their job, in consultation with staff and governors. They know what is needed for

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63 see note (3)
their schools, staff and students and they have a great deal of wisdom to draw upon. Decisions should not be made independently of them and there should be enough scope for them to tailor policy to local circumstances and needs. Attention should be given to ensuring headteachers can get advice and support for leadership, in a manner which supports wellbeing and leadership through reflexivity.⁶⁴

Many staff are expressing concern about returning to work in terms of their own underlying health issues, and are anxious that conditions outlined in the DfE report of 2 July⁶⁵ do not provide adequate protection. These include staff with medical conditions, those with vulnerable people in their households (including elderly relatives), and many members of BAME communities. They will need to be risk assessed before return and provided with sound advice. Some will need to be offered the opportunity to work from home.

The DfE document of 2 July⁶⁶ rightly recommends that schools continue to improve resources for distance learning in case of future lockdowns. The difficulties are not recognised of simultaneously teaching classes face-to-face full time and preparing quality online resources. Teachers need to be consulted on ways of overcoming this problem. The value of resources provided by professional bodies such as subject associations should be recognised and funding provided to extend this.

It should also be recognised that teachers have been placed under excessive pressure of top-down surveillance and control in recent years, which has been a major cause of people leaving the profession. This cannot continue in the current challenging circumstances. School staff need to be able to concentrate on children’s academic and wellbeing needs without being placed under excessive pressure to satisfy other demands.

**Recommendations:**

The following aspects would help teachers to plan for September:

1. **Safe working environment:** teachers should not be asked to work in unsafe conditions, should be given clear health and safety advice for self, colleagues and classes, and should be involved in action planning for a second wave or a local lockdown

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⁶⁵ see note (3)
⁶⁶ see note (3)
2. *Clear focus:* fund improved support for social, emotional, mental and physical health, particularly in disadvantaged communities, so that teachers can concentrate on curriculum and pedagogy.

3. *Appropriate resourcing:* in order to address current inequalities, ensure that every child and young person has online access to learning not only in preparation for another spike or local lockdown, but also to support their ongoing in-school learning.

4. *Professional trust:* remove judgmental monitoring and performance management; use Ofsted to gather evidence to monitor national patterns and support progress and to develop best practice case studies; encourage school-based responsibility and accountability; involve teachers in decision making.

5. *Training and development:* convene a national panel for teachers to contribute ideas on what professional learning would be most useful to them in the short, medium and long term, and to discuss how this might best be provided given financial constraints.

6. *Targeted support:* provide individual support and respite for teachers who have individual needs as a legacy of the pandemic (bereavement, mental health struggles, anxiety about safety of the workplace, extra caring responsibilities).

7. *A proper holiday:* teachers need time to recharge, refresh and re-engage before preparing for a period of further uncertainty.

### The school in the community

The recent situation has shown how much the education and development of children and young people requires diverse individuals and agencies. There is a need to rebuild external services that interact with schools, including libraries, youth services, children’s centres, leisure centres, sports clubs, youth theatres and music groups.

Given the concerns about students’ mental health needs, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and counselling services need to be given high priority, while SureStart centres and local youth services can provide connections and support that reach out into families and communities. All of these have suffered from reductions in funding so a process of rebuilding is needed.

COVID has also made clear once more that schools have a crucial role for the whole community. This is by no means limited to enabling parents to go to work. In particular, schools in areas of deprivation should be funded and encouraged to develop as centres of education and activity for the whole community.
A closer partnership between schools and communities would bring multiple benefits for children and their families. Schools should be encouraged to work with resources in their community, including voluntary groups such as the scout movement, creative artists, sports clubs to provide a richer curriculum than the school operating in isolation. The school curriculum should, in part, engage with issues of local concern as well as the concerns of young people.

Covid has also highlighted the extent to which school learning depends on families being able to afford equipment, books and other resources. The work of organisations such as Children North East and the project of 'poverty proofing' schools is essential and needs funding. Children North East's new programme Local Matters trains teachers to become community researchers in order to stand alongside the community and identify and respond to local issues. Research projects led by various universities, such as the Teachers Attitudes Towards Poverty survey, has identified that a significant minority of school staff hold deficit views of families in poverty. It has also identified a low awareness level of benefit rates and the benefit process in schools. There are training needs for staff in these issues.67

Recommendations:

1) Encourage stronger links between schools and communities, particularly in disadvantaged areas.
2) Support staff development which improves understanding of families and neighbourhoods under the stress of poverty.
3) Fund community / university /school partnerships for investigating and responding to local issues and leading change.

Conclusion

The crisis we have experienced this year poses serious challenges to policy makers and professionals. It exposes faultlines in society and reveals problems which had previously only been noticed by a minority. It can also highlight the distance between policy makers and practitioners and the gap between their understandings of how schools work.

At the same time, such a crisis presents opportunities to address serious problems and make lives better. This requires more than short-term technical fixes, it requires vision.

We hope that this document, drawn up through cooperation between researchers and teaching professionals, will both point to solutions for specific problems and offer a route towards a better education system and a better society.

Each section in the report has generated specific recommendations. The following provides a summary of key proposals and principles.

1) Although different human needs have to be balanced, public health cannot be sacrificed to unrealistic educational demands.

2) Rapid improvement is needed in communicating medical information to local authorities and school governors, in order to facilitate sound decision making.

3) While infection levels remain serious, arrange for smaller classes in primary schools; and new forms of curriculum organisation in secondary schools in a combination of on-site and distance learning.

4) Recognise young people's experiences during recent months, and adopt a sensitive approach to re-engaging them, rather than threatening parents with fines.

5) Support parents and teachers in monitoring and caring for students' mental wellbeing, providing specialist support where needed.

6) Schools should prioritise children's wellbeing, thinking in terms of a 'recovery curriculum'. Young people should be re-engaged by a curriculum which is not only broad and challenging, but which engages their interests and concerns and develops independence and initiative.

7) Improve the quality of distance learning resources, and ensure that all disadvantaged students have access to computers and internet.

8) Increase the funding of tutorial support for students who have encountered the greater barriers to learning, and route this through schools.

9) Reduce the pressures of public examinations and primary school tests, including reduced content for GCSEs, greater use of coursework and portfolios, and cancelling universal testing in primary schools for the coming year.

10) Provide a supportive environment for teachers and other staff, by increasing trust, cooperation, and professional development, whilst removing sources of threat such as inspections which could serve as a distraction from students’ needs.

11) Encourage stronger links between schools and communities, particularly in more disadvantaged areas.