

# Reopening schools:

## Four barriers that should not be overlooked

On the 10th of May, the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson announced his ambition to start reopening schools in June, starting with Reception, year 1 and year 6. Dr Robin Bevan says we cannot make plans until we know why schools are being re-opened and until we find solutions to four key challenges that are at risk of being overlooked.

**Dr Robin M Bevan**, headteacher, Southend High School for Boys, Essex

I am not alone in looking forward to having a full complement of pupils back in school, actively learning, socialising and being socialised.

Naturally, it would make sense to open schools and colleges fully at the point where the prevalence, impact and risks associated with COVID-19 are minimal. If all precautionary measures have been relaxed, then full provision of state schooling is logical and desirable.

However, this leads us to a natural question: why open schools prior to this point?

### What is our intention?

It is not a facetious or 'blocking' question: it is a real and fundamental desire to know what we are trying to achieve, because it is not until you declare why schools are opening further at an earlier stage of the 'exit strategy' that you can decide—assuming that any opening is partial or phased, which the education secretary last week said it would be—which groups of learners should be accommodated on site and in what patterns.

You need principles to establish priorities. For example, if the overriding concern is lack of progress towards public examinations, it makes very good sense to look to maximise the attendance of years 10 and 12.

However, much of the thrust in public argument is predicated on economic grounds: pupils in school so parents can

go to work. If this is the principle driver, it makes no sense to be granting limited spaces to pupils on the basis of year group, rather we should consider parental employment circumstances.

Thinking further, demands around preparation for secondary transition might reasonably prioritise the attendance of year 6, but effective transition activities are hosted by secondary schools and involve—by their very nature—extensive social mixing.

You simply cannot decide who to accommodate in the first wave of school re-opening without deciding what it is you are trying to achieve by doing so.

### Physical and/or social distancing—which is being relaxed?

Lockdown has been characterised by a clear phase of social distancing—reducing the frequency, duration and number of social interactions to reduce the multiplicative factors in transmission. This was followed by the imposition of physical distancing in those environments where social interaction continues to be a necessity: most obviously, the two-metre spacing in supermarket queues.

If it is the intention to maintain both social distancing and physical distancing then schools cannot and should not re-open any more than a pub or high-street fast food outlet should.

One or both of these constraints need to be relaxed before there is any logic in considering a re-opening phase for schools.

It might be that the evidence shows that young people are less likely to pass the virus on. If the evidence supports this, then there would be a reduced emphasis on social distancing. Schools can have classes that mix with each other in different combinations (as is the way in almost all GCSE timetable options).

Alternatively, it may be that the evidence supports young people gathering in closer proximity than others for sustained periods in a classroom, but not mixing in too many different combinations.

Again, you cannot determine how schools should re-open, or at least which pupils to accommodate in what pattern of provision, until it is clear which lockdown constraint is being relaxed and why it is being relaxed for young people (and for staff in schools but not for others in the wider community).

### Four challenges: England's context

There are well-documented challenges that will have an impact upon the re-opening of schools in England and other parts of the UK in ways that are quite distinct from our European neighbours, as is highlighted by the recent re-opening of schools in Denmark.



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ADOBE STOCK

### Transport and parents

Compared to mainland Europe, where many or most pupils cycle or walk, very many of our pupils don't or can't. Southend, for example, has more than 1 000 pupils attending secondary schools who use the C2C train line and another 1 000 who arrive on contracted school buses. In primary schools, the culture here is for the parents to accompany their children to and from school (many schools do not release without sight of parents collecting at gates). Any re-opening needs to exhibit consistency in social and/or physical distancing in school, but also on journeys and during parental collection. Finally, it is not clear whether commercial bus transport services for remote pupils will resume if there is not a full ticket-paying contingent on board.

### Buildings

Compared to mainland Europe, many of our school buildings are dated, densely populated, with narrow corridors and limited direct access points to the outside. Typical school classrooms in 1920s building stock are 45 m<sup>2</sup>. If we are allowing for a two-metre physical distance measure between all attendees in a lesson, such rooms can accommodate a maximum of 10 pupils and one teacher. If physical distancing is to be sustained then classes may need to be split into thirds not halves. Although there may then be enough adults to look after those pupils, split three ways, there certainly will not be

the specialist teaching expertise required for their attendance to be worthwhile for promoting learning.

### Cleaning

Most of our schools are cleaned by low-wage staff who work either early mornings or evenings, alongside other low-paid work during the more typical working day. Very few, if any, schools have cleaners on site during the day in sufficient numbers to sustain adequate cleaning. The Danish example, again, is a stark contrast.

### Staffing ratios/class sizes

We have consistently one of the lowest teacher-pupil ratios or, equivalently, one of the highest typical class sizes in Europe. At post-16, class sizes have increased exponentially in response to the funding freeze, with classes of 24 or more now commonplace. Even at this level, half-sized classes will not meet the physical distancing expectations given the size of the rooms. The challenges with staffing levels will be exacerbated by the fact that during the early phase of re-opening, staff with health or age or carer vulnerabilities will remain absent and many staff members will face sustained childcare challenges that limit their attendance.

### Conclusions

The framework for any re-opening of schools and colleges needs to be set in the context of the intention—economic, educational, etc.

The framework needs to be framed

with specific details regarding the relaxation of one or more lockdown constraints. Physical and social distancing can be encouraged through different models of school or college provision, but cannot be guaranteed. Any move toward re-opening needs to clearly specify, at national level, the parameters for levels of contact, spacing, mixing, etc.

Individual schools will have very different building configurations, available staffing levels, outdoor space, etc. The maximum permissible level of pupils returning to any one school must be at the discretion of the headteacher. It is likely that, in the early stages, this may mean a return of less than one-third of pupils; followed, perhaps, by a period with around half and so on.

If the principal goal is sustained learning, there is little point in bringing large numbers of pupils into a school for a pattern of provision that is not staffed by relevant subject or phase experts. Schools will need to decide between provision on rotating days, or rotating weeks, with remote learning sustained in the non-attendance phase.

If there is a pressing need to facilitate parental return to work, alternate patterns of attendance may frustrate the economic imperative. A regular pattern—every third week, in school, for example—is likely to be preferred to more frequent variations. It is strikingly clear that co-ordination of attendance for families with children in different year groups across different schools will be almost impossible. **CHHE**