
February 05, 2021

The Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)

The Independent SAGE Report 34

The Return to School: A consultation document

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The Return to School: A consultation document

Core summary points

- Closing schools may be necessary when the pandemic is out of control, but it should always be a last resort and a temporary measure.
- In order to ensure that school closure is as short as possible, it is necessary to impose greater restrictions on other non-essential activities and to reconfigure school environments to make them as safe as possible.
- Reopening schools should be a priority and occur in advance of lifting other restrictions.
- The timing of the reopening should be driven by data not by dates. That is, it should occur as soon as it is possible to do so without leading to a loss of control over infection rates.
- The return to school should be phased rather than all at once, with careful monitoring of the effects of initial moves and with the further lifting of safeguards contingent on falling local infection levels
- Urgent measures need to be implemented in order to mitigate the negative impacts of school closures on both mental health and educational achievement.

Background

In the light of unprecedented levels of infections, hospitalisations and deaths, on 30th December Independent SAGE called for an immediate national lockdown, including the ‘closure’¹ of schools². Accordingly, when the UK Government announced such a policy on Monday 4th January, we supported their decision. At the same time, we strongly endorse the position of the WHO that, given the lifelong economic and psychological harms of closure which fall particularly on deprived and vulnerable groups, schools should be the last institutions to close and first to reopen³. We also agree with the Director General of the WHO when he

¹ The term closure, while widely used, is potentially misleading given that schools remain open to vulnerable children, children of keyworkers etc. and that, as a result, some five times more children are attending in-person classes than during the first lockdown (<https://schoolsweek.co.uk/pupil-attendance-fives-times-higher-than-during-first-lockdown/>). To denote this, we adopt the practice of putting this term in quotation marks wherever we use it.

² <https://www.independentsage.org/29th-december-2020-emergency-statement-and-call-for-immediate-national-lockdown/>

³ <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-introductory-remarks-at-the-press-briefing-with-unesco-and-unicef>

states that “time during which schools are closed should be used to put in place measures to prevent and respond to transmission when schools reopen”⁴.

In light of this, we propose any discussion of how to safely reopen schools should address the following four core elements:

1. Measures should be taken immediately to ensure that school students can return to in-person learning as soon as possible. These include:

- Tighter regulation of everyday activities to bring down infection rates more quickly. People are still allowed to enter each other’s houses as cleaners, tradespeople and estate agents. Religious gatherings are still permitted. The definition of essential worker is so loosely drawn as to require many more people to attend workplaces than in the first lockdown. It is plainly not the case that schools have been the last to ‘close’ and this must change if ‘closures’ are to be as short as possible.
- In combination with tighter regulation, there must be greater support for people to stay at home. This includes a legal duty on employers to allow staff to work from home if possible, and where that is not possible, easier access to furlough payments which, at present, are denied to many (including most working parents⁵).
- The school environment should be transformed to minimise the risk of infection transmission. This should include, where possible, use of outside spaces, enabling adequate ventilation in all classrooms; free provision of good quality face coverings for all pupils at primary and secondary levels.

2. The reopening of schools should be a priority and happen in advance of reopening other sectors of society. It should not be tied to arbitrary dates but be based on explicit public health criteria.

In general terms, schools should open as soon as it is possible to do so without leading to an overall loss of control of infection rates. Insofar as such reopening will inevitably increase the R number, schools should reopen in a careful and phased manner, akin to the ‘traffic light system’ in Norway⁶. The impact of initial changes on R should be carefully monitored before making further changes in schools and relaxing restrictions elsewhere in society. Decisions to make these changes should be sensitive to the local incidence of infection. Changes in schooling should be made by the schools themselves in consultation with local public health authorities and within the parameters of national guidelines.

Here, as an illustration, we provide a concrete example of how this approach might work, although it is not meant as a detailed blueprint and more as a stimulus to discussion:

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jan/13/furlough-refused-to-71-of-uk-working-mothers-while-schools-shut-survey>

⁶ <https://www.helsenorge.no/en/coronavirus/kindergartens-and-schools/>

- Schools in a local authority area should begin to reopen when R is less than 1 and the incidence falls below 100 per 100,000 *estimated cases per day*, which corresponds to about 100 per 100,000 *confirmed cases per week*.
- When the rate is between 50 and 100 cases per 100k, schools should employ 'red light' safeguards. These include such measures as reduced class sizes either through prioritising the return of certain year groups (e.g. early years and examination years) and/or through a rota system within years whereby, at any point in time, half of pupils learn in-person and half online; banning mass activities and assemblies; wearing of masks in all classes for all school students, primary and secondary. It is important to stress that, for this approach to work, the provision of computers, wifi connections and study spaces for all students becomes all the more urgent.
- When the rate is between 10 and 50 cases per 100k, schools should employ 'amber light' safeguards. These will allow all pupils to access full time in-person classes. However, mask wearing and banning of assemblies will be maintained.
- When the rate is below 10 cases per 100k per week, schools should employ 'green light' safeguards. These will remove all safeguards bar mask wearing in crowded spaces, basic social distancing and hygiene measures.
- Should rates rise again, it will be necessary to reimpose stronger safeguards or even close schools again. However, as we have already emphasised, closure should always be a last resort and come after restrictions have been imposed on all other non-essential sectors of society.

3. Given the priority placed on schooling, it is essential to ensure that staff are available to teach and to operate schools. Accordingly, once the nine priority groups, based on vulnerability, have been fully vaccinated (including vulnerable teachers), the benefits of vaccinating school staff should be considered seriously by the JCVI alongside the claims of other groups. This will reduce staff absences and hence allow schools to remain fully open, providing students with a full curriculum.

4. After schools have reopened, urgent action must be taken to mitigate against the harms caused by closure and, more generally, by the pandemic. This will include the following:

- There is by now ample evidence of severe mental health problems amongst young people with 50% of 16-25 year-olds indicating that their mental health has deteriorated since the start of the pandemic and 26% saying that they feel unable to cope with life⁷ - although it is important to stress that these problems were not necessarily due to school closures but to more general aspects of the pandemic such as the fear of illness and uncertainties about

⁷ <https://www.princes-trust.org.uk/about-the-trust/research-policies-reports/research>

the future⁸. Despite these mounting problems, only 40% of school students said that a counsellor was available in their own school and only 27% had any interaction with a staff member about their wellbeing⁹. Accordingly, there needs to be urgent provision of funding to ensure that all pupils have access to the necessary mental health support in schools.

- There is also clear evidence that the loss of schooling and skills will have severe economic impacts on young people¹⁰ and that these losses are disproportionately concentrated amongst more deprived and vulnerable groups¹¹. These effects need to be addressed amongst all year groups, but action is particularly urgent in the case of year groups who will leave school in the summer and face the transition to work, college or university with impaired qualifications and skills. This will require a radical rethink of entry requirements, with full account taken of differential learning loss. It will also require the provision of fully funded skills training (e.g. foundation years leading to college/University entry) to allow people to thrive in their post-school environments.
- Finally, in order to mitigate the harms to young people, it is necessary to have a full understanding of the nature of those harms. In particular, priority funding should be given to research that addresses the hidden mental and physical health (i.e. Long COVID) impacts of the pandemic on children.

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/dec/27/covid-poses-greatest-threat-to-mental-health-since-second-world-war>

⁹ <https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/feb/01/covid-could-cost-children-350bn-in-earnings-through-lost-learning-says-ifs>

¹¹ <https://post.parliament.uk/covid-19-and-the-disadvantage-gap/>

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