

Dr Mary Bousted and Kevin Courtney
Joint General Secretaries, NEU
By email

16th May 2020

Dear Mary and Kevin

I was sorry that Kevin was unavoidably unable to meet this week and pleased that we have rearranged our meeting for next week. I am writing to try to move forward the discussion about wider re-opening of schools.

Over recent days, I have become gravely concerned about the quality of public debate about re-opening schools. We are all agreed that there are strong reasons for children to come back to school and also legitimate concerns which need to be addressed. I feel strongly that all of us in education should be working together to create workable plans and making sure that the tone of our conversation builds rather than undermines the confidence of teachers and parents.

Since the start of the coronavirus crisis, I believe that schools and teachers have been an essential part of a national response and have played their part with distinction. As you yourself have said, most schools have remained open, serving the children of key workers and vulnerable children. Teachers have worked hard to provide good quality distance learning, continuing to teach remotely and online, creating and making available materials and providing direct support to children and families. Parents and the community have noticed and appreciated this.

We did not close schools primarily to protect children and teachers – but rather to protect the elderly and vulnerable in society who are severely affected by this disease. Of course, there are very vulnerable children and teachers and they must be protected in any wider return to school, as must similarly vulnerable household members. But we know that children are much less severely affected by the disease and that the closure of schools has few benefits to their health but very large costs, both to their wellbeing and to their education. Equally, we know that the risks of this disease to younger, healthy adults are very much lower than to the elderly.

Both our planning and our language should reflect the actual level of risk that exists for the people affected: low for children and the young and healthy, starting to rise for the over-55s and much higher for those with pre-existing conditions. At school level, planning should reflect the risks but not exaggerate them. There should be concerted action nationally and locally to reassure those who face very low risks – including particularly the overwhelming majority of children and younger teachers.

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We can expect that this virus will be with us for the rest of our lives. Viruses mutate and so even as immunity increases and vaccines and treatments are developed, we will have to learn to live with it as we do with other endemic diseases. In time, we can hope and expect that the impact of the virus will be reduced. However, as things stand, there seems no good reason to believe that either a vaccine or a proven treatment will be widely available by Christmas, let alone by September. For the remainder of this year, we can expect the virus to be circulating in the population while we continue to take steps to avoid further peaks.

In the interests of children and young people, it cannot be right for schools to remain closed to all but a few pupils for that long. In that context, I feel that we should be working together to get schools open for more children while making sure we are protecting children and adults – both within school and in wider society – by taking the right protective measures.

Our approach is to work through in every school a very detailed plan as to how wider opening can be organised, following the principles in the guidance and working through all the specific issues of the building and the staffing. Planning will take account of the needs, vulnerabilities and concerns of all staff and children. A full risk assessment will be produced and will have to be signed off by me before a school can open. If for any reason (for example, because an unusual number of staff are shielding, living with someone who is extremely vulnerable, or otherwise vulnerable themselves) it is not possible to implement opening properly, then we will limit what we do to what is safe.

I do not think we are unusual in this approach, and that all leaders, governors, trusts and local authorities are approaching the task with similar care and concern. I appreciate that some schools may need more support, and I know that we, other large trusts and local authorities are ready and willing to provide that support.

However, it is important in doing this planning properly and safely, taking account of all concerns and finding the best solutions that heads involve staff in the planning. I am pleased to say that colleagues across our schools have been heavily involved in planning so far. However, I think that your advice to your members not to speak to leaders about planning places both leaders and other teachers in a difficult position and is counter-productive in risking making it harder to produce the best plan.

I feel that there is a great deal of common ground between us and indeed with government: wider opening should not happen until the government's tests are met; it must be fully planned and risk assessed; vulnerable staff and pupils must be protected; scientific advice must be followed to support action to avoid a second peak; and it is fundamentally desirable to get children back to school.

It therefore seems to me that we need to be talking to each other and I hope that you will feel able to change your advice to members to support constructive engagement and detailed involvement in planning at school level. More generally, we should be working together so that – if at all possible – we can speak with one voice at the time of re-opening, giving confidence to parents and teachers.

In that context, I am more than willing to discuss with you how best we can move forward and give you confidence to change your advice to members. I can assure you that we are taking great care to support the welfare of our colleagues your members and if there are things we can do to give you the fullest confidence in that, we are more than happy to discuss that.

I am writing in similar terms to Patrick Roach.

Yours sincerely

PD

Sir Jon Coles
Chief Executive