
No full return until it's safe

SOCIALIST PARTY IN EDUCATION - July 2020



As Tories demand schools fully reopen in September, stand firm and say:

Not safe until NEU 'Five Tests' met !

UNION strength has shown it works. By standing firm and insisting on firm risk assessments based on the NEU's '5 tests', backed up the threat of members asserting their rights under 'Section 44', school reps and local officers have largely prevented a reckless return to wider opening this term.

But the real test is yet to come. Johnson and Williamson are determined to push through a full opening in September, despite the clear risks to staff, especially those at higher risk, and to the safety of the wider communities our schools serve. The NEU Executive needs to meet urgently and confirm that:

1. Our policy remains - "Not safe unless 5 tests met" - and they aren't yet met for September.
 2. Members acting together to protect health and safety will be fully supported by the Union.
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What needs to be done for September to be safe

NEU "Test One" demands that the case count shows a "sustained downward trend and confidence that new cases are known and counted promptly. And the Government must have extensive arrangements for testing and contact tracing to keep it that way".

Thankfully, for now, the case counts are falling but, with the lockdown being lifted, will that still be the case in September? The ONS are already reporting that numbers of new infections have stopped declining in recent weeks.

When the data is shared properly, Independent SAGE have recommended that the threshold used in Germany of 50 cases per 100,000 population over a seven day period is used as a trigger. Leicester has not been alone in exceeding that figure - other outbreaks will occur.

Independent SAGE have produced a series of damning reports into the effectiveness of existing test and trace systems. They say testing and tracing is taking far too long and data needs to be linked up with local NHS services.

School risk assessments alone cannot secure safety if test and trace is not in place. We have to demand it is.

"Test Two" calls for appropriate physical distancing and PPE, locally negotiated with schools & local authorities.

The DfE guidelines for full school opening in September are shamefully inadequate. Union guidance can't only reflect what the DfE says - it has to go much further.

Just as the Union warned, the Leicester outbreak has shown that schools can become 'institutional amplifiers' of the virus as it is brought into schools by pupils and then spread between them and back into the community.

The contradiction between the increasing evidence of the benefits of wearing face masks in indoor spaces and the complete lack of PPE in most schools - despite the clear duties to provide them set out under the PPE at Work Regulations 1992 - is another real cause for concern.

The return of all pupils creates a whole new set of risks - far greater and more difficult to solve than those that have been assessed up to now for more limited opening. Reps must insist on a completely new risk assessment, and proper consultation and agreement on measures being taken to adequately address those risks. Given the lack of opportunity for real consultation now, and the extent of issues still to resolve, not least around the safety of large 'bubbles' of students - let alone the full '5 tests', no school should be reopening fully at the start of next term.

"Test Three" calls for "comprehensive access to regular testing for children and staff to ensure our schools and colleges don't become hot spots for Covid-19.

Many infectious individuals, particularly children, don't show obvious symptoms. Staff are therefore fearful that they might be unknowingly bringing the virus home to their families. Some workplaces that are reopening after lockdown have been providing employee testing. School staff, working indoors without physical distancing, should be provided with the same reassurance too through testing, regardless of whether they are showing symptoms.

"Test Four" calls for a whole school/college to be tested when a case occurs and for strict isolation protocols.

The latest DfE guidance just isn't good enough. It suggests wider groups of pupils might need to self-isolate only if "schools have 2 or more confirmed cases within 14 days" and even then "whole school closure based on cases within the school will not generally be necessary". For NEU tests to be met, we must insist on much tighter protocols.

"Test Five" states that "vulnerable staff, and staff who live with vulnerable people, must work from home".

In September, huge pressures will be piled on staff who feel themselves, or their relatives, to be at risk. They could be faced with a choice between health and their incomes.

No individual member must be left to fight alone. If this test is being failed by a school, the whole union group must say that management have failed to acceptably account for risk overall. Unions should call on members to act together to defend their safety - and that of others.