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The Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)

The Independent SAGE Report 29

A 'Safe Schools' policy for re-opening education as soon as possible and mitigating the harms of closure

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Submitted to The UK Government and the People of Great Britain & Northern Ireland by Sir David King, former Chief Scientific Adviser, UK Government, Chair of Independent SAGE

A 'Safe Schools' policy for re-opening education as soon as possible and mitigating the harms of closure

Summary

This paper proposes a 'safe schools policy' aimed at mitigating the harms of school closure, ensuring the continuation of education during closure and enabling the return to schools as soon as possible by increasing the COVID security of the school environment.

Independent SAGE recognise that the decision, on January 4th, to close primary and secondary schools was necessary because of previous failures to implement COVID security measures, the consequent spread of infection in schools and the contribution of schools to rapidly increasing infection levels in the wider community. Given the critical position that had been reached, it was necessary to limit all forms of social contact, including within educational settings, in order to bring the pandemic back under control, to stop the NHS being overwhelmed and to save lives.

Independent SAGE also recognises the substantial harms caused by school closures in terms of both the immediate mental health of school students and their long-term future prospects. Moreover, these harms are far greater amongst the more deprived and precarious sections of the population notably because of the lack of resources necessary for remote study.

Accordingly, Independent SAGE calls for the immediate formation of a National Education Task Force involving Government, Local Authorities, Teachers, Parents and School Students in order to:

1. Plan, resource and implement changes that will create a more COVID-secure environment in schools and hence allow a safe return to school as soon as possible
2. Determine the resources necessary to allow all students to participate in remote study, organise provision of those resources and monitor their roll-out.
3. Monitor the mental health needs of students and staff and provide the necessary support in schools.
4. Evaluate the impact of the pandemic on the acquisition of knowledge, skills and accreditation so as to design interventions that enable school pupils:

- a. to catch up on expected levels of learning.
- b. to make successful transitions to employment or further/higher education and consider how to reduce the negative consequences of school closures.

Schools and COVID transmission

In November 2020, Independent SAGE, in collaboration with the EAGLE Research Group for Education, noted with alarm the growing number of COVID-19 cases in schools, the fact that infection was growing most rapidly in the school age population, from where it was spreading into older age groups, and that, while Governors and Head Teachers had been charged with taking measures to minimise in-school transmission, this was effectively impossible in the absence of financial and logistical support. We outlined a series of measures that should be taken immediately in order to improve COVID safety in schools¹.

Since the report was written, all of these concerns have become more acute. The numbers of infections in schools grew rapidly, requiring increasing numbers of students and staff to self-isolate. In the weeks before Christmas some 20% of secondary state school pupils were absent² with higher rates of absence in more deprived areas³. Indeed, in some of the poorer areas hardest hit by the pandemic, such as Knowsley on Merseyside, absence went as high as 39% in late October⁴.

Although the Government repeatedly insisted on its determination to keep schools open, its failure to make schools safer in effect meant that attendance at school was impossible for fluctuating groups of children, especially poorer children. This inequality was exacerbated by the fact that, as demonstrated during the first lockdown and stressed by the Children's Commissioner, children from deprived backgrounds were considerably less able to maintain their studies from home⁵.

¹ <https://www.independentsage.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Safe-schools-v4b1.pdf>

² <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>

³ <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/school-attendance-rates-across-the-uk-since-full-reopening-november/>

⁴ <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/merseyside-borough-highest-country-covid-19194496>

⁵ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/06/15/how-the-covid-19-crisis-has-affected-childrens-right-to-an-education/>

With the emergence and spread of the new B117 Covid-19 variant, which appears to be more transmissible in adults and children alike⁶, the importance of schools for the overall spread of infection in the community has become more apparent. On the 17th December 2020 the Children's Task and Finish group of SAGE noted that children aged 12-16 are (by a factor of 7) most likely to be the first COVID case in their household and that, if this is the case 2-16 year olds are also twice as likely as those over 17 to pass on the infection. A meeting of SAGE itself on 22nd December concluded that the growth of the pandemic could not be stopped (i.e. R brought below 1) without schools being closed⁷.

Given this evidence, available since before Christmas, the closure of schools has become inevitable in order to bring the pandemic under control before it overwhelms NHS capacity, already stretched to the limit. Independent SAGE called for such action to be taken in an emergency statement on 30th December⁸. As late as Sunday 3rd January, the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson insisted that he had no doubt that schools are safe and urged parents to send parents back to school on the Monday⁹. However, on the Monday, he changed his position and announced that all schools would be closed from the following day for all but the children of critical workers, for vulnerable children and, since, for children lacking the resources for home study.

We regret the confusion uncertainty, and delay and difficulties that this caused parents and children. We are concerned at the fact that students came back to school and mixed for a day before the closure decision was made. We are also concerned at the ongoing confusion as to who is exempt from the policy and, in particular, the expansion of the category of 'critical workers'. This is in danger of increasing the number in school to a point where the

⁶ https://cmmid.github.io/topics/covid19/reports/uk-novel-variant/2020_12_23_Transmissibility_and_severity_of_VOC_202012_01_in_England.pdf

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/948606/s0991-sage-meeting-74-covid-19.pdf

⁸ <https://www.independentsage.org/29th-december-2020-emergency-statement-and-call-for-immediate-national-lockdown/>

⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55521580>

policy becomes less effective and the ability of teachers to deliver remote learning is undermined.

Nonetheless we regard the overall decision as correct. However, we consider that closing schools is only acceptable as part of a broader strategy aimed at mitigating the harms caused by the closure and making schools safer so that they can be reopened as soon as possible.

Making schools safer: We have already addressed this issue in some detail in our November report, and so do not need to repeat it here. The crux of the issue is the need to implement the basic mitigation measures in the school environment: spatial distancing, good ventilation, masks (we support the use of masks in classrooms for secondary school students – as already occurs in Scotland¹⁰ – with exceptions for those who cannot wear them and with free provision so that all students have access to good quality protection), and hygiene measures.

Of these measures, possibly the most important is spatial distancing. At present this is all but impossible with class sizes some of the largest in Europe and actually still growing¹¹. In other countries this has been addressed by hiring extra teachers and extra spaces, thus being able to split classes into smaller groups where distancing becomes possible. All this is true of Denmark, for instance, using empty museum theatres and other civic buildings¹². As a result, classes comprise 10-12 pupils and are able to keep a safe 2m distance¹³.

This is just one example of many measures which could be taken that would decrease infection transmission within schools, thereby rendering them safer both for pupils/staff and for community transmission, and which would thereby expedite reopening of in-person teaching for all students. What is more, it would help keep infections low after the reopening.

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-reducing-the-risks-in-schools/pages/protection-levels-3-and-4/>

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jun/25/england-class-sizes-largest-in-nearly-20-years>

¹² <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/photo-essays/2020-05-22/denmark-s-children-return-to-school-in-museums-and-graveyards>

¹³ <https://www.politico.eu/article/back-to-school-turns-into-back-to-reality-test/>

As one element in the 'safer schools' strategy, we endorse the use of large-scale (often termed "mass") screening of staff and pupils using lateral flow tests, but not as a substitute for such a strategy. Testing itself is meaningless without a clear pathway of response to a positive or negative test result. Further, it makes little sense to put one's efforts into identifying infections without first seeking to minimise them. Such screening should be done by trained staff and not made the responsibility of already over-stretched school staff. It should be used as a means of finding cases rather than as a means of determining whether or not people are infected, given the high false negative rates. That is, a negative test should not be taken as an indication that someone is not infected or to relax other mitigations at either an individual or collective level. Finally, there must be clarity on the oversight of testing, and a clear mechanism for responding to test results, including clinical care and advice to those testing positive and their families.

Mitigating the harms of school closure

Mental health: There are two broad categories of harm caused by school closure. The first has to do with mental health. The President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, Adrian James, has estimated that COVID-19 will lead to some 10 million people, including 1.5 million children, needing extra mental health support¹⁴. He stresses that this is not mainly or even principally caused by lockdown measures but rather due to general aspects of the pandemic such as fear of infection, the trauma of being infected and of parents being infected, the impact of long-COVID, uncertainty, financial anxieties, fear for the future and so on. Hence, the best way of dealing with the mental health dimensions, like the physical health dimension, is to act early and firmly to suppress the virus. Nonetheless it is also clear that the social isolation of children who are not at school is an important factor. A Young Minds report¹⁵ found that 87% of school pupils said that they were lonely during the first lockdown, and that 69% of those back at school said their mental health was poor. Yet 40% said their school had no counsellor to talk to and only 27% said they had any conversation with a staff member about their well-being. 23% said there was less mental health support

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/dec/27/covid-poses-greatest-threat-to-mental-health-since-second-world-war>

¹⁵ <https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/>

at their school compared to before the pandemic, only 9% said there was more. In sum, the mental health needs of school pupils are clearly not being addressed. The need to do so will only become more urgent due to the current closures. One important mitigation could be for children to be in internet contact with all members of their class several times per week and to be given opportunities to work in groups, as they would in school. This makes the provision of internet connectivity and tablets or laptops with headphones crucial for all children who do not have them. Equally, the children of key workers and those who are vulnerable and attend school also need attention to their mental health.

Educational losses: The second category harm is educational, with lifelong implications for those affected. While the Government refers to in-person teaching at school being replaced by remote on-line learning at home, it is clear that this is practically impossible in many cases and moreover that there are large inequalities in the quality and quantity of education that can be delivered to those from more or less privileged social groups. As early as April, research from the Sutton Trust showed that 57% of independent secondary schools were delivering online lessons every day, whereas the figure for state secondaries was only 22%¹⁶. This does not take account of differences between more and less deprived state schools.

An analysis by the National Foundation of Educational Research in the summer¹⁷ showed that 61% of schools in the least deprived areas had lost 2 months or less of education in total (compared to 18% of those in the most deprived areas). By contrast 53% of those in the most deprived areas had lost four months or more (compared to 15% of those in the least deprived areas). In all, it was estimated that the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers increased by 46% during the first lockdown alone. One further figure bears reporting. The most important single factor which determined engagement with education during lockdown was access to IT and study space. 81% of those who had limited access to

¹⁶ <https://inews.co.uk/news/coronavirus-private-school-twice-as-likely-to-receive-online-lessons-state-schools-420007>

¹⁷

https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4119/schools_responses_to_covid_19_the_challenges_facing_schools_and_pupils_in_september_2020.pdf

these resources were less engaged than their peers¹⁸. An IFS survey found that the poorest parents found it difficult to support their children's learning at home¹⁹

It is clear that these inequalities will only grow in the second lockdown unless systematic efforts are made to counter them. In order for all children to be able to learn it will be necessary, on the one hand, to provide support to schools to deliver online lessons both in terms of extra teachers, IT support and technology and also through educational programs such as those provided online by the Oak National Academy²⁰ and offline by the BBC²¹.

On the other hand it will be essential to ensure that all school pupils have the necessary resources to learn remotely. The Government has made promises regarding computers (though not other necessary resources such as connectivity or space), provision has been far from adequate. Indeed, on the day after the Government laid a duty on all schools to make provision for remote learning (2nd October), they wrote to headteachers announcing an 80% cut in provision of laptops for disadvantaged pupils²²!

Rather than rectify this failure, the Government has proposed that those lacking provision should be added to the list of vulnerable children who should return to schools for in person provision²³. First, though, this undermines the whole point of school closures making the policy less effective and therefore extending the period of closure. Second, it exposes underprivileged children to still greater risk of infection. Third, it still leaves these children unable to study at home, whether to complement in-person teaching or should they have to self-isolate in case of infection. It is a policy of perpetuating rather than addressing inequalities.

¹⁸ <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/news-events/press-releases/new-report-looks-at-pupil-engagement-in-remote-learning-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

¹⁹ [R178-Family-time-use-and-home-learning-during-the-COVID-19-lockdown-1.pdf \(kinstacdn.com\)](#)

²⁰ <https://www.fenews.co.uk/fevoices/45662-new-government-backed-online-school-to-open-its-virtual-doors-to-support-pupils-while-schools-are-closed>

²¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-55552962>

²² <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/oct/24/englands-schools-to-receive-fewer-laptops-for-distance-learning>

²³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-55565537>

It is therefore essential that the Government prioritises immediate provision of laptops and wifi connection for every school pupil. Additionally, for those who do not have the possibility of quiet study spaces at home, 'study hubs' with IT provision should be set up in communities located in currently unused premises and fully regulated to maximise COVID security. There needs to be full transparency about the nature and progress of this provision. Figures should be published on a regular basis which breaks down needs to a school level and reports the extent to which these needs have been met.

Finally, even if everything possible is done in terms of provision, it can at best only slow the further growth of educational inequalities and the harm done to disadvantaged children. It remains equally, if not more important to recognise these disadvantages and determine ways of mitigating their effects on the transition from school to further study and work.

For instance, in the case of young people continuing to further and higher education, entry should be guaranteed to those from disadvantaged backgrounds subject to achievement of minimum standards. There should also be the provision of fully funded summer schools (including maintenance grants) to help equip young people moving into apprenticeships or hoping to find employment, with the skills they have missed and which are necessary for success in employment or with further study at College or University.

For younger children, the National Education Task Force should advise how best to ameliorate the loss of learning opportunities.

Conclusion

Independent SAGE agrees with all those who insist that maintaining children's education should be a major priority during this pandemic²⁴ and that schools should be last to close and first to open in any COVID control strategy. Tragically we are currently in a situation where our schools are a major source of infection transmission and where regaining control of the pandemic is only possible if they are temporarily closed. However it would be entirely unacceptable simply to close schools without at the same time taking measures to increase

²⁴ <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-introductory-remarks-at-the-press-briefing-with-unesco-and-unicef>

their safety so that they can be reopened with a minimum delay and also to take all steps necessary to mitigate the harms caused by school closure.

This report has outlined a strategy which includes all these elements. We argue that such a strategy needs to be developed and implemented without delay. Moreover, given the widespread consensus around the importance of education, we propose that the strategy is implemented by a national task force bringing together all stakeholders including national and local government, providers and participants in education. Such a task force is an instantiation of best practice in the co-design and co-production of policy and practice²⁵. It will be in a position to identify real needs, to understand how policies can best be implemented in local conditions and to ensure that there is broad support for these policies.

We call upon all four nations of the UK to create such task forces in order to implement the proposals contained in this report.

²⁵ <https://jech.bmi.com/content/74/8/617>

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