

Letter to Matt Hancock, Secretary of State for Health & Social Care
Cc: Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for Education

20th April 2020

Dear Matt Hancock,

As NHS workers with children currently attending school, we are worried about recent speculation that schools could be wholly reopened soon.

The risks of working at the current time should not need explaining to government. Your own working patterns have resulted in widespread, high profile infection among the ministers and professionals we see on TV every day. The Prime Minister required intensive care treatment, which, in his own words 'could have gone either way'. We too have seen the impact of this virus at work in essential jobs - although those of us who have had it, may never know because we have not been tested and no antibody test is on the horizon.

The systematic review in the [Lancet](#) recently concluded that evidence regarding the impact of school closures is 'equivocal'. What is not equivocal, however, is that social distancing works and that school closures 'flatten the curve' for other infectious respiratory diseases - such as influenza. The reason findings are equivocal about school closures, per se, for coronavirus specifically is because nobody has kept schools open while maintaining the other measures. What does that tell you? Do not make us the global guinea pigs. It is self-evidently unwise to force hundreds of people into small rooms in small buildings during a pandemic.

Many of us go into small primary school playgrounds of inner-city schools along with the families of the 120 other children for each year group. We are part of a workforce that receives media attention when workers die from this virus. Our risk is higher because of inadequate PPE and exposure to a larger viral load, but other workers are not separated out or counted in the data. We each reflect on the uncounted care workers, transport workers and shop workers who are losing their lives. Their deaths do not make the front pages, but nor do they work in environments that are deep cleaned as often.

There is no cure for Coronavirus and there is no vaccine. It is not fair to increase teachers' risks while not knowing how many people are losing their lives because of work, because a teacher's work means sharing rooms and equipment with many people, from many households, again and again. Some teachers have already tragically died from the virus, and we do not want to risk any more. The conditions of strict widespread testing for suspected Covid-19, rigorous contact tracing and scrupulous adherence to quarantining must be met before a return to schools - for the enduring safety of teachers and the wider community.

Until we know more about the transmission of this virus and the risk factors for severe illness. Until we know that staff can access PPE, virus tests and accommodation if they live with vulnerable people. Until we know that children will not learn that their teacher has died because of an infection caught in their class, we should remain sensible and wait.

The economic harm of keeping schools closed is significant - but is known. This means the government can act and intervene to mitigate this harm. We do not know about the harms of reopening schools yet. The example that is set by opening schools earlier than is known to be safe runs counter to all the messages you are sending - that the recent slowing of hospital admissions should not be taken as a premature signal that we are safe.

Iain Wilson, NHS nurse

(signed by over 7,000 NHS and school staff)