

TEACHERS' PANEL

14 May 2020

John Swinney
Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh

Dear John

We write as the Teachers' Side of the SNCT, representing all of Scotland's Professional Associations, to urge that the Scottish Government continues to exercise the greatest caution regarding the reopening of schools.

We have been alarmed by the cavalier attitude of the UK Government whose unilateral announcement of schools reopening on June 1st, albeit on a reduced scale, has created confusion, concern, and fear amongst teachers and parents.

In Scotland, there has been a firm message around staying at home to reduce the spread of the infection. That instruction remains in force for the rest of this month. To paraphrase the First Minister, you cannot then simply flick a switch and reverse of all that justified messaging, as this could have profoundly adverse consequences for public health.

It appears to us, therefore, that there is a strong argument to maintain a cautionary approach and to reinforce such by indicating schools will reopen after the summer break.

Not only does that bring clarity to parents, pupils, and teachers, it provides a significant period to plan and prepare for the very real challenge of delivering a blended learning experience for Scotland's pupils in session 2020/21. A minimalist approach to such planning risks uncertain delivery.

That time is vital, also, to building confidence and investment in Scotland's mission to deliver for our children.

By way of contrast, a premature and enforced return to schools in June would serve to undermine the necessary commitment of staff, many of whom would be dismayed at an apparent disregard for their views, and also fearful for their own safety.

The simple fact is that countries which have moved to even the limited reopening of schools have seen a rise in the Reproduction figure – in Denmark, for example, the figure rose from 0.6 to 0.9. There is no reason to suggest that Scotland would be any different, especially if school re-opening was linked to more people going back to work, which itself will impact on the R number.

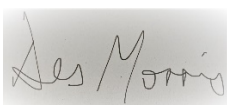
Why would we risk the gains of the lockdown weeks by moving too quickly on schools reopening?

And for what benefit? Most schools close in June. Pulling pupils back for a week or even two is approaching meaningless, especially as many parents will see little value in the exercise and almost certainly keep children at home rather than run a risk to their health.

We believe our members have responded well to the current crisis, whether it be in the Hub provision or supporting students remotely, but they are worried. They know that children can be asymptomatic carriers; they know that social distancing in schools is difficult, they know that adult contact in the workplace can lead to infection, they know that they then bring the virus into their own homes.

Given that the Scottish Government's own target for establishing adequate capacity for "Test, Trace, Isolate and Support" is the end of this month (assuming the target is met); that the lockdown "Stay at Home Save Lives" message is in place until just before the end of this month; and that the current evidence shows little change in terms of new infections with an R figure still close to 1, we would again suggest that indicating an aim for an August restart for schools (subject to all the necessary caveats) would bring enormous benefit in terms of both planning, and securing the active support of staff and parents for an agreed recovery plan focused on the shared aims of equity and excellence and determined to support the well-being of our pupils.

Best wishes



Des Morris
Teachers' Side Joint Chair