

I am writing to lodge my concern regarding the plans we have seen that seem to imply the default position of blended learning as the 'new normal' in Wales from September.

I passionately believe that schools need to open full time, for all students in September. I am a doctor working on the nhs frontline and the parent of 2 children in Monmouthshire.

A blended learning scenario should be the emergency fallback only. Used if and when local lockdowns and school closures are needed due to spikes in the virus or, if in the worst-case scenario, a full second wave of covid-19 calls for the need for wider school closures. The Welsh government should be doing everything in their power to promote the full reopening of schools in September, whereas it seems, at the moment they are trying to sell 'blended learning' to teachers and parents as a new and better approach. It is a completely inadequate option for all the reasons I will outline below, and will be letting down a whole generation of children.

Covid is incredibly low risk to children. The vast majority of children are either asymptomatic or experience only mild symptoms. More children have died of complications arising from chicken pox in the last year.

The majority of the evidence has found that children are much less likely to be implicated in the spread of covid than adults. WHO has confirmed this as has the royal college of paediatricians. I am happy to send on some evidence summaries if they are of interest.

Today, there were only 24 new cases of covid-19 in the whole of Wales, and over the last few weeks the vast majority of cases have been centred around the food processing plants in Anglesey, Wrexham and Merthyr Tydfil. Outbreaks like these can be targeted and dealt with at a very local level. Many parts of Wales are seeing zero cases each day and yet their children are still being treated as high risk. There should be no need for children to social distance at all. In terms of the risks to staff, which are still very low but obviously higher than to the children, school staff could social distance from each other, staff could aim to stay 1m + away from students where possible

and where it is not minimise the length of time they are in close proximity to avoid the chance of contracting the virus. Staff could be provided with clear face visors for things like one to one reading where they need to be closer for a longer period of time. Children should be able to go back to normal in terms of their interactions with each other, though. It is also worth remembering that when schools closed as part of lockdown it was not to eliminate the virus but to relieve pressure on the NHS to prevent it being overrun. The NHS is not in danger at all from this now, and given that case numbers are continuing to fall and should fall further over the summer, the partial school closures should not stand.

Purely from a practical point of view, the plan of 'blended learning' is ludicrous. The furlough scheme ends in October, more and more sectors of employment are returning to work, parents simply won't be able to stay at home with their children 3 or 4 days a week in September, unless you want mass unemployment and many parents to lose their sense of self worth and skill set? It seems as though there is a wish to see a return to stay at home mums and women without careers. I am an obstetrician and gynaecologist with 11 years experience. At present my children can be in full time nursery to allow me to work (as can any nursery age child as of this week). My eldest is due to start school in September so I am at a loss to understand how she is suddenly deemed high risk).

You will force people who are not 'keyworkers' to use grandparents to look after the children which entirely defeats the object of these restrictions in the first place. These are the people who are more vulnerable to the virus, and yet they will have more exposure if schools are not fully open. Keyworker children are being grouped together in mixed age groups and 'baby sat' rather than being taught. This is deeply concerning and discriminatory.

The educational impact on the children is already huge and will become even more enormous if you choose 'blended learning' over full reopening in September. Why are our children having to make this enormous sacrifice when covid does not significantly affect them? I cannot believe that you will let the education of Welsh children fall so far behind that of their counterparts in England and Scotland. I know a lot of parents who live near the border will seek to get their children into English schools instead if you continue to pursue this deeply harmful policy. Teaching is a very specialist profession that needs specific training to deliver each subject and for different age ranges.

We know that even the summer holidays 'widens the gap' between advantaged and disadvantaged children. This period will have a devastating impact on disadvantaged children and impact the rest of their lives. Wales is a predominantly rural country. In my area internet speeds are simply inadequate for zoom conference calls for even one child at a time let alone those with parents and multiple children trying to work from home.

The social, emotional and psychological impact on children is already massive and will only grow if you stick to blended learning in September. This has already been evidenced by child psychologists and paediatricians.

We are seeing a worrying rise in suicide and self harm amongst children. As well as domestic abuse and child abuse.

The blurring of home and work life is very damaging to children. Home should be a place they can relax, and not have to worry about school work (at primary age at least) and school should be a place where they focus on learning. By merging the two settings you are putting huge pressure on family relationships as parents are forced to pressure their children to complete school work, rather than spending quality family time with them outdoors and learning through play and about wider life. This will especially impact on working parents who will have to spend all their time at home trying to home school their children, leaving no time to simply be parents.

Social distancing has been proven to be psychologically damaging to children and is going to be detrimental to their physical, social and emotional development. Children need to be able to get close to each other for proper interaction. They need to be close to their friends. My own children, and those of my friends, have missed their friends desperately. Children, especially those in Foundation Stage, learn and develop through play and countless opportunities for this are being denied through social distancing. Children need all the sporting and cultural aspects of school too, especially those that are less academically inclined, and there is a danger the curriculum will become very narrow and uninspiring if social distancing continues in schools. Team sports need to return for children to develop cooperation, team work and leadership skills. School plays and concerts need to return so students can develop creatively. If this continues there will be a whole generation of people robbed of opportunities to succeed and find their passion. On top of all of this there is the very serious fact that while school remains optional and a once weekly event for children, many children suffering from abuse and neglect will go overlooked. This is already happening, and with the pressures of work, home-schooling and families together all the time, this problem will increase. For many children school is their safe place, their place of

normality, routine, social outlet and fun. How can you deny this to them for a virus that poses a negligible risk to them?

As for children who are shielding, money and thought needs to be given to them now to enable them to also have access to school e.g. live streaming of lessons, opportunities through gaining extra space and tutors to allow them to have some lessons with small groups of shielding peers where social distancing can happen, extra online or one to one tuition for shielding children having to learn at home whose parents may not be able to offer them all they need. Their needs are important and need to be addressed but it is madness to deny the entire population of Welsh children a school-based education for the few who cannot attend. Be creative instead. There have always been children who cannot attend school due to serious illness, disability or mental health problems. It is up to schools and the state to make education accessible to them, but it has never been assumed that all children should miss out on school for the few who cannot attend, so why on earth would that be the case with those shielding from covid-19?

It upsets me so much that my 4 year old has already been robbed of the end to her time in nursery and the transition to primary school that she should have been entitled to. The thought that she could now be denied the opportunity for a proper school education, learning through playing with her peers is so cruel. By all means get schools to prepare robust systems for 'blended learning' should the worst happen and more school closures are needed in the winter, but don't prepare for this to be the 'new normal' in September. It is a fall-back option and a last resort only because it bears no comparison to proper school-based learning and is woefully inadequate in all regards.