

## **Comments for petition “Fully open schools for all ages in Wales as the next step from 15th March”**

### **Key points:**

Fully open schools because:

- of the detrimental effects of lockdowns on children’s mental and physical health:
  1. “For some children education is their only way out of poverty; for others school offers a safe haven away from a dangerous or chaotic home life. Learning loss, reduced social interaction, isolation, reduced physical activity, increased mental health problems, and potential for increased abuse, exploitation, and neglect have all been associated with school closures. Reduced future income and life expectancy are associated with less education. Children with special educational needs or who are already disadvantaged are at increased risk of harm. The 2019 report of the children’s commissioner for England estimated that 2.3 million children in England were living in unsafe home environments with domestic violence, drug or alcohol abuse, or severe mental problems among parents. These long term harms are likely to be magnified by further school closures.” ([Closing schools is not evidence based and harms children | The BMJ](#))
  2. “The UK children’s commissioners have all pointed out the harms of closing schools to the wellbeing of children and young people. Many pupils may never be able to catch up on lost time in school, and vulnerable teenagers are falling through gaps in the school and social care systems. There is no substitute for face-to-face learning. In the absence of strong evidence for benefits of school closures, the precautionary principle would be to keep schools open to prevent catastrophic harms to children.” ([Closing schools is not evidence based and harms children | The BMJ](#))
  3. “Children’s Commissioner for Wales, Professor Sally Holland, released the findings of her second survey into how young people are faring during the crisis, she warned that the pandemic was having a "crushing impact" on under 18s.

In the survey, named Coronavirus and Me, children shared their views and experiences of the pandemic. Though responses varied, a "worrying" number of youngsters described the devastating impact the last 12 months had had on their lives.

The report found that as well as loneliness, not being able to see friends is having the biggest impact on children’s lives, followed by not being able to see other family members and school and college closures.

A worrying 15% of seven to 11 year-olds reported feeling lonely “most of the time”.

On learning remotely more than half of 12 to 18 year-olds said they enjoyed learning at their own pace from home, but many worried about falling behind with learning.

Levels of confidence and motivation with education decreased with age. A large majority of 15 to 18 year-olds are concerned about falling behind, their qualifications and 69% report low motivation to do school work.

Problems are worse for those who are disadvantaged. Disabled children and teenagers were more likely to worry about coronavirus and feel sad and unsafe.

Those from Black, Asian and other ethnic minority groups were more likely to feel lonely and less likely to say they feel safe than their peers.”

(<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/education/lonely-frustrated-angry-children-teenagers-19820279>)

- there is insufficient evidence of the role of school closures in minimising covid-19 transmission.
  1. Although school closures reduce the number of contacts children have, and may decrease transmission, a study of 12 million adults in the UK found no difference in the risk of death from covid-19 in households with or without children. Only 3% of people aged over 65 live with children.

The overall risk to children and young people from covid-19 is very small, and hyperinflammatory syndrome is extremely rare.

In-person learning increases teachers' exposure and might be expected to increase their risk of becoming infected, but accumulating evidence shows that teachers and school staff are not at higher risk of hospital admission or death from covid-19 compared with other workers. Teacher absence because of confirmed covid-19 in England was similar in primary and secondary schools in the autumn term, despite secondary schoolchildren having much higher rates of SARS-CoV-2 infection. Moreover teacher absence decreased in tier 3 regions during the November lockdown despite schools remaining open.

The role of children in community transmission is not clear. Recent infection surveys using PCR tests, show that around 0.5-1% of children have a positive result, and school closures mean it has not been possible to obtain evidence regarding the spread of the new variant in schools. However, earlier studies, including from Australia, Norway, Switzerland, Italy, and Germany, in which all individuals were tested regardless of symptoms found transmission rates to be low, particularly among primary schoolchildren. Ecological studies and descriptive studies of viral prevalence within schools show that it reflects community prevalence but is not higher.

International modelling studies which estimate that school closures have a meaningful effect on reducing transmission rates are all confounded by the near simultaneous introduction of multiple interventions (including lockdowns, curfews, closures of bars and restaurants). Moreover, they do not account for indirect effects of school closures which prevent parents from working outside the home. A systematic review of observational studies showed that in those studies with lowest risk of bias, school closures had no discernible effect on SARS-CoV-2 transmission. ([Closing schools is not evidence based and harms children | The BMJ](#))

- It was promised back in March 2020 (UK wide) that schools would always be the last to close and the first to open.
  - Non-retail and tourism shouldn't be back ahead of education.
- They have fully opened in England on the 8<sup>th</sup> March. (The scientific evidence for England and Wales should be the same.)
  - In 2020, after the October half term firebreak in Wales, years 7 & 8, were able to return to school. They were categorised the same as primary school children who posed little threat of transmission.

Testimonials of parents whose families have been struggling:

*"I have a child in year 10 that has not physically been to school since 3rd December due to the year group needing to self isolate and the extended lockdown. He has an IEP but as he doesn't need extensive support and is not under social services, he is not considered vulnerable even though he struggles with learning at home. He told me that he hates home schooling. I have another child in year 4 that has completely disengaged with learning at home. Myself and my husband both work full time and we despair at how far our children have fallen behind. We are a 1st world country with a second rate standard of education and little regard for our children's well-being and social skills. It's not acceptable." Sue Price*

*"I have 3 children 14,11 and 9 and have worked full time throughout. I have since last week decided to reduce my working days to 2 per week (which financially is entirely untenable) but have had to do so as am so concerned about the mental health of my two eldest. Both were positive, enthusiastic, happy, hopeful teens pre Christmas and now they are entirely despondent and have no hope. It's heart breaking to see how this welsh government have torn them apart. I myself lobbied hard from last March for their fair right to an education but now I too am finished for. Nothing left in the tank and racked with worry for my kids." Nikki Guyer*

*"I used to have a very sporty confident 15 year old son who enjoyed every day of his life, he was a member of a football team both in school and out of school, he was working towards his black belt in karate, his school grades and attitude of life was so positive. I don't recognise my son now, every day is spent in his bedroom staring at a screen, this is not school!! when online lessons are cancelled he goes back to bed. I try to encourage him I really do but i've given up now because how can I give him hope when I don't see any. Only the other day he said to me "mum this is it isn't it, there's no school for me any more.". This broke me and I had to walk out of the room and cry. i can't do this any more, I just want my son to have a happy life." Ruth Hilmi*

It is clear that children have the least to gain and the most to lose from school closures. It is also evident that the school closures are causing damage in yet unknown proportions when the evidence for the benefit of them is insufficient. The Welsh government must protect the rights of children and fully open the schools.