

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Welsh Parliament
Children, Young People and Education Committee

Ymchwiliad i effaith argyfwng Covid-19 ar blant
a phobl ifanc yng Nghymru

Inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on
children and young people in Wales

COV 188

Ymateb gan: Dirprwy Bennaeth/Athro, Ysgol
Uwchradd Crughywel

*Mae'r safbwyntiau a fynegir yn yr ymateb hwn yn
rhai personol, nid rhai'r Tîm Arwain nac Ysgol
Uwchradd Crughywel*

COV 188

Response from: Deputy Headteacher/Teacher,
Crickhowell High School

*The views expressed in this response are a personal
and not those of the Leadership Team or Crickhowell
High School.*

I write to you as members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee in the Senedd. I want to express my concerns about the impending full reopening of secondary schools in Wales and offer some ways to reduce the risks to students and their households as well as school staff and their households of following this policy. The reduction of the risks will also make it more likely that schools will be able to stay fully open for all students for the majority if not all of the academic year. My suggestions are:

- **Regular weekly testing**
- **Mandating or strongly recommending the wearing of face coverings**

I am a secondary school teacher in a Welsh secondary school who is a Biology specialist. I was until recently a Deputy Headteacher at the same school but have resigned my position on the Leadership Team as I didn't feel I could in all good conscience tell our staff and students to follow WG guidance that I didn't believe kept them and their households sufficiently safe. The contents of this letter are my views and not the views of the Leadership Team of my school.

The concerns that led me to doubt the guidance originally were some of the assumptions made, such as, asymptomatic students wouldn't transmit the virus and that the disease was not airborne so a 2m social distancing was sufficient. Those concerns as well as others are proving to be well founded as the evidence continues to build that secondary schools students can pass on the infection at similar levels to adults (1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7) and that coronavirus can be transmitted over distances greater than 2m in aerosols especially when people are indoors together for extended periods of time (4, 5, 8, 9, 10). Both of which are a potentially severe problem when the Welsh Operational Guidance (11) currently suggests that secondary school students should not wear face coverings or socially distance at all for 5 hours a day in classrooms and they should mix in contact groups the size of year groups

which in the case of my school are approximately 140 students. Interestingly the 'Technical Advisory Group Advice from Children and Education subgroup' 7th July report (12), which was published at the same time as the Welsh Operational Guidance, is clear that secondary school students present more of a problem in terms of transmission of the disease than primary age students and actually suggests that social distancing should be maintained for secondary age students and that ideally contact groups should be of about 10 for secondary students. So the evidence was there but the understandable political decision has been made that all secondary school children must return to school full time and be taught their normal curriculum "subject to a continuing, steady decline in the presence of COVID-19 in the community" (11).

I understand this political decision as fully reopening when numbers of infection in the community are very low makes sense. Wales are fortunately in a better place than England because of the slower easing of lockdown in early summer and the more effective test and trace system that we have in this country and hopefully this will be maintained until September. **However, if we want the full reopening of schools to be maintained in Wales for months not a few weeks we must put in place regular testing and mandate or strongly recommend face coverings.** Otherwise as numbers of Coronavirus cases increase as we go into the colder months and we get cases seeded into Wales from England and beyond the virus will rapidly spread into our communities from our schools and vice versa.

As a teacher I instinctively understand the aspiration and urgency for all students to return to school. This instinct is backed up by lots of scientific evidence, for example the recent Royal Society DELVE report (13), which should be required reading for all decision makers in the area of education, makes it absolutely clear the negative impact of students not being in school. However, the same report recognises the dangers of a full reopening of secondary school in terms of the increased risk of transmission of Coronavirus both in terms of the health issues but also in terms of having to further disrupt the education of students in local or national lockdowns and gives a number of recommendations the first two of which are:-

1. Suppressing the virus in the wider community to reduce the risk of transmission in schools once at full capacity, and to minimise future disruptions to learning; if local outbreaks occur, other facilities where the risk of transmission is high (such as pubs or gyms) and non-essential shops should be closed, before considering school closures;
2. Providing realistic guidance and substantial extra resources to ensure schools can minimise chains of transmission. This includes: parental guidance, translated into multiple languages, on when to keep their child at home applying the precautionary principle; rigorous hygiene

rules; distancing and reduced mixing; extra teachers, PPE (one or two full PPE sets and provision of cloth face coverings for teachers, older children and those with underlying health issues); management of staff rooms, regular testing and prioritisation for vaccines for teachers;

Wales unlike England have achieved the first recommendation which is an excellent start and the Operational Guidance (11) has covered many of the points in the second recommendation. However, there are two aspects of the second recommendations that need to be prioritised to maximise the chances of maintaining full reopening of secondary schools for an extended period.

- Regular weekly testing of preferably all but at the very least a large sample of students and school staff to allow asymptomatic carriers to be picked up so that effective testing and tracing can be carried out to minimise transmission within both the school and community. I note the suggestion by the lead author of the Royal Society DELVE report Dr Ines Hassan (15) that if testing capacity is limited group testing could be used “where individuals’ samples are pooled to check for any sign of Covid-19 within a group, followed by tests for each member in the event of a positive result”. This will also help with the inevitable situation that will develop in October/November when a substantial number of students will develop COVID19 symptoms not because they have the disease but because they have colds or flu.
- Mandating or strongly recommending the wearing of face coverings by students and staff to reduce the chances of transmission between members of the school community who will either not be socially distancing (e.g. full classes of students) or will not be able to always maintain social distancing on narrow corridors etc (e.g. school staff).

If both of these measures are put in place it will minimise the dangers of a full reopening of secondary school; it will increase the confidence of secondary school staff and their unions as well as the parents/students that secondary schools are relatively safe and crucially it will make it much more likely that secondary schools can stay fully open for longer, perhaps for the entire academic year. If these measures are not put in place the evidence builds that any full reopening will be short lived, and we will return to partial reopening of schools and perhaps full shutdown of schools relatively quickly (16, 17).

It is also crucial that the distinction between the dangers of primary schools and secondary schools fully reopening and teaching the entire curriculum is recognised and resources (such as testing capacity) should be directed to the secondary sector to minimise the increased risks in this sector. As well as the secondary students being potentially as infective as adults, if students are to be taught their curriculum fully specialist staff have to move between classes and students have to be in groups with different memberships

regularly. This inevitably will lead to much more contact between different individuals in secondary schools. To give an example a primary teacher will see the same 30 students as opposed to a secondary school teacher seeing approximately 100 students a day and the next day it might be 100 different students. Over a week the average secondary teacher will have 10 different classes which might have 30 students per class so you could be seeing 300 students for a minimum of an hour at a time usually in an indoor environment. Even if you have a number of smaller GCSE option choice subjects and A-level classes you could be seeing 200 students a week. So a typical secondary school teachers will be exposed to between 170 and 270 more students than a typical primary school teacher in a week. Similarly, primary age students will be in contact groups of 30. Secondary school will have year group contact groups, in the case of the school I teach in that is approximately 150 pre 16. So, a secondary school student in our setting will be seeing 120 more other students than a primary school student. It also should be noted that secondary teachers over a week will see students from all or almost all of the student contact groups in the school. It is therefore vitally important that any infection in a secondary school is picked up early to prevent the rapid transmission of the infection to very large numbers of households within the school community hence the need for regular weekly testing. Also, because of the vast number of contact points in secondary schools between individuals, face covering should be made mandatory or strongly recommended, to reduce the risk of transmission particularly as most of those contacts will not be socially distanced because of the space limitations of schools. As discussed previously even if the 2m social distancing between students and teachers is maintained it will not be fully protective for either party due to airborne transmission and will not always be easy to maintain anyway, particularly on narrow corridors and offices.

Finally, it should be noted that if we fully reopen secondary schools without the mitigating factors the Royal Society report the scientific evidence and I suggest in terms of regular testing and wearing of face coverings we are very likely to get a rapid transmission of the disease with subsequent hospitalisation/fatalities and the requirement for local or national lockdowns and the subsequent disruption to students education. There is a stark statistic that provides an example of the dangers involved in fully reopening secondary schools without enough reduction of risk. The Welsh Operational Guidance for reopening schools references a ONS report (14) covering the last month when schools were full open in March and it stated that staff in educational settings were at no greater risk of death than any other profession. However, the ONS reports associated data spreadsheet (Table 8, rows 96 and 97) show that approximately 3 times more secondary school teachers under 65 died from Coronavirus than primary teachers (a quick Google search confirms that there are approximately the same number of primary and secondary teachers in the country). Suggesting that

secondary school teachers are actually at greater risk than other professions and by implications that their households and the adult members of the households of the secondary school students are also at greater risk.

I cannot see any other way of squaring the circle of reopening secondary schools fully and relatively safely without regular weekly testing and the use of face coverings if we want the reopening to happen for any length of time. This is especially true as the evidence of a second surge of Coronavirus develops across the world and as we move into the autumn and winter when conditions for viral spread will improve and colds and flu symptoms will complicate matters further. Obviously, the Welsh Government would need to organise the regular testing. However, the wearing of face coverings schools could organise quickly and simply if there was a simple modification of the Operational Guidance to state that face coverings are 'mandatory' or even 'strongly recommended'. It would simply become part of the school uniform with the normal exceptions for certain individuals with breathing difficulties etc and would be easily 'sold' as what it is, a way of protecting the school community, the local community, the NHS and the people in the students households. I understand concerns around the impact of face covering on hearing impaired students. However, the National Deaf Children's Society suggests some potential solutions in terms of face coverings with visible panels and phone apps that can transcribe the spoken word 'live' (18, 19). This is another area where extra resources should be directed to allow the positive benefits of face coverings for the whole school community to be attained whilst supporting those individuals with hearing impairments.

If we don't have regular weekly testing and widespread use of face coverings in secondary schools we will be back in partial school reopening and probably full shutdown relatively quickly with all of the resultant concerns about students safeguarding, students missing their education, the social aspects of school and student assessment. We have the opportunity to put in place these effective preventative measures that will stop us ending up in the same position as we did in March. We should take the opportunity now as we have already seen what happens when you delay decisions involving this virus.

Please can you look into my suggestions and if they have merit use your influence to promote these solutions. In my opinion the evidence is there that they will reduce the risks of transmission and subsequent public health issues as well as allowing all students to be in secondary school for an extended period. Regular weekly testing of all and face coverings need to part of the "new normal" until we get on top of this insidious disease.

Cofion gorau,

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