# The Independent SAGE Report 8

## Preliminary consultation document to inform an updated Independent SAGE schools report

## What do we have to do to keep schools open?

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Keeping schools closed harms all children, especially the most deprived. It ruins individual life chances and exacerbates social inequalities. As the COVID-19 pandemic was accelerating out of control in early 2020 it was appropriate to close schools to help stop COVID spreading. Crucially, this gave the governments in the four nations time to prepare for schools to reopen. But now the return of all children to full time education must be an absolute priority. Children in Scotland are already returning and those in the other nations will soon follow. If appropriate measures are taken, the risks to children, parents, teachers, support staff, and local communities can be kept low to ensure that schools not only open, but also stay open.

Unlike in March, we now have a growing body of evidence on the risks associated with schools, ranging from careful case studies of superspreading events in particular schools, through to detailed mathematical modelling studies. The kind of risk we are talking about here is the **risk to the community** in terms of increased spread of COVID-19 in the community and not the risk to children. The **risk to children** from COVID-19 is **very low**.

There is good evidence that, where community transmission of COVID-19 is **low or controlled** in a country as a whole, re-opening schools has little effect on increasing spread of COVID19 **nationwide**. However, at a **local** level, there is also clear evidence that re-opening any particular school can result in a **local outbreak or cluster of infections**. This is because school reopening makes a super-spreading event more likely by providing a space for very many people to mix over prolonged periods. Where levels of local infection are very low, this remains very unlikely (because no one at the school is infected) but in local hotspots where relatively many people are infected, schools provide a way for a single infected person to spread it to many others. In countries where transmission is high or growing everywhere, school reopening is much riskier as every school could potentially host a super-spreading event.

In light of our current knowledge, **we here suggest 5 steps that we believe must now be taken for schools to reopen safely.** These are:

1. reducing the level of virus circulating in the community to reduce the chance of schools triggering a super spreader event;

2. making sure we recognise quickly if such an event might or has occurred by spotting infections within schools rapidly and responding;

3. provide detailed guidance to schools and communities on how to reduce chances of transmission within schools which – crucially – depend on the type of school and the level of local infections;

4. make sure that tackling inequality and ensuring an excellent education for children in our most deprived communities is front and centre of planning;

5. co-creating detailed plans with local communities and schools and ensuring communication is clear and trustworthy.

A little more detail about each recommendation is given in the following two pages. **We welcome the views and concerns of others**. Following public consultation, we will update the steps below taking into account diverse views and any new evidence.

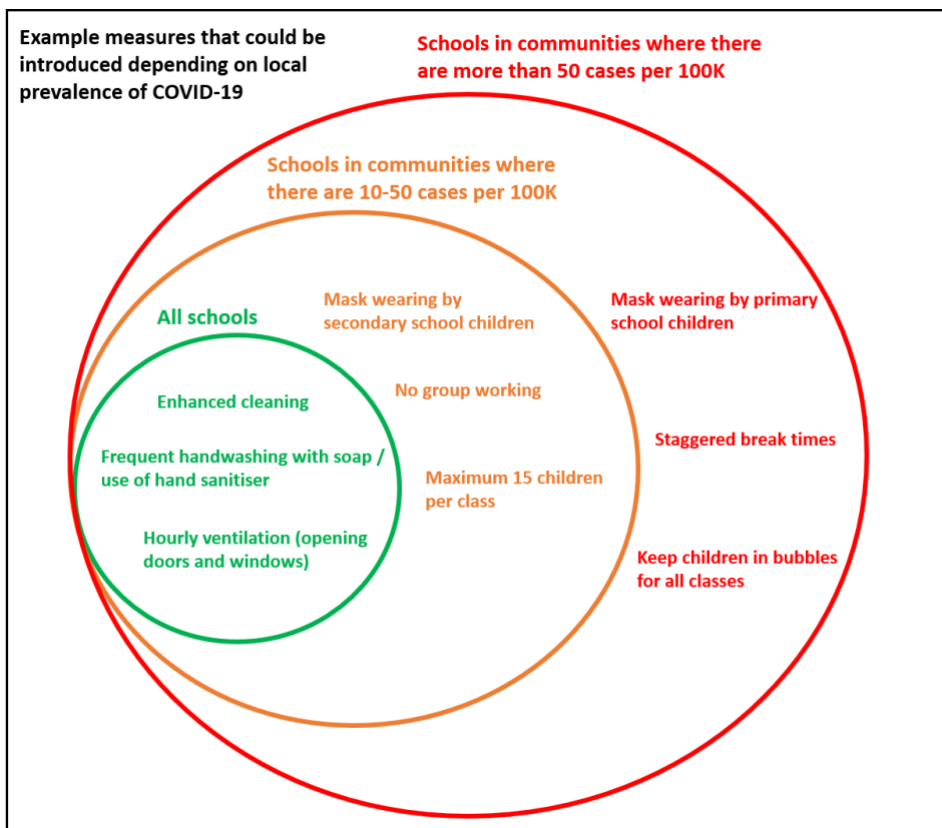### 1. Reduce the level of virus circulating in the community

The risk of infection spreading in any setting, including schools, is determined substantially by the probability that someone who is infected will enter that setting. Each of the four nations had, until recently, been bringing down numbers of new confirmed cases but numbers are once again increasing. As we have learned more about COVID19 and how it spreads, we now know that many people are infecting others while feeling totally healthy and with no idea that they might be infectious. We cannot know for certain why cases are again rising although it does seem that opening up spaces where large numbers of people can congregate indoors, such as pubs, has provided an opportunity for COVID19 to spread more widely, similar to the increases many other countries are now experiencing. As it is widely agreed that schools reopening must be a top priority, governments must consider whether other elements of the reopening process should be halted or reversed in order to reduce the number of new cases in the community. We can significantly reduce the risk of closing schools again due to local outbreaks If proper steps are taken now to reduce transmission of COVID-19.

### 2. Ensure that outbreaks in schools and their local communities can be identified and controlled rapidly

Schools are part of a larger local community, whose members might be at increased risk of infection when schools open. This increased risk would be minimised by a highly effective find, test, trace, isolation and support (FTTIS) infrastructure. This is because FTTIS can break chains of transmissions early and halt a super-spreading event in its tracks. However, FTTIS is just not operating well enough in England and this needs to be fixed – now. Indeed, a recent high-profile modelling study found that there is a high risk of a large second wave of infections if schools in England are reopened without effective contact tracing. The existing system in England is fundamentally flawed. While new plans to transfer resources for test trace systems to local authorities are welcome, the forthcoming renewal of contracts for operators of the national schemes is an opportunity for a major redesign. Such re-design should build on and financially support pre-existing  local and regional public health systems who have significant experience and expertise in contact tracing pre-COVID, who know and are trusted by the community, and can lead effective tailored messaging and door-to-door tracing and follow-up as required. There must also be targeted support in terms of resources, accommodation and social contact in order to ensure that everyone is able to isolate without financial or psychological damage. These localised programmes are even more essential as has been demonstrated in areas with high ethnic minority populations such as Blackburn and Leicester. It will also be necessary to incorporate ways of routinely surveying symptoms or presence of COVID-19 within schools to ensure that any outbreak in a school is identified rapidly.

### 3. Provide realistic guidance and substantial extra resources to ensure schools can minimise the chance of COVID-19 spreading

The current Department for Education guidance in England is too vague and unspecific on how to open schools safely. It makes much use of terms such as "where necessary", measures that suit "their particular circumstances", and "applies in specific circumstances", without clear elaboration or detailed case studies. While it is important to allow schools flexibility, it is essential to provide much more detailed guidance, including illustrative scenarios that have been developed jointly with schools. This should cover localised public health advice to minimise COVID-19 spread, risk assessment, and a system of controls for prevention and response. Given evidence that the risks, feasibility and appropriateness of control measures differ between younger and older children, the guidance must differentiate between primary and secondary schools throughout. It should also include guidance for how measures might change in response to a localised breakouts of new cases in the community that the school serves, as is done in Germany. Examples of the sort of measures that could be considered in different contexts are shown in the graphic below. We welcome feedback from parents, children and teachers on appropriateness and feasibility of any measures.

**Example measures that could be introduced depending on local prevalence of COVID-19**

Schools in communities where there are more than 50 cases per 100K

Schools in communities where there are 10-50 cases per 100K

All schools

Mask wearing by secondary school children

Mask wearing by primary school children

No group working

Enhanced cleaning

Staggered break times

Frequent handwashing with soap / use of hand sanitiser

Maximum 15 children per class

Hourly ventilation (opening doors and windows)

Keep children in bubbles for all classes

## 4. Leave no child behind

Children have varied greatly in their ability to cope during lockdown, reflecting inequalities in access to private space at home, internet and technology, and family support. There is considerable evidence that lockdown has widened existing inequalities. Closure of schools impacts children not only through lack of education but also through social isolation, well-being and child protection. Governments must therefore urgently develop contingency plans and guidance, backed by sufficient financial and personnel resources, to support students who have experienced learning and other losses from school closures and to ensure they are not disadvantaged further by additional closure of schools during the autumn and winter terms. This is particularly important for schools situated in deprived and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods that often bear a disproportionate burden of COVID-19. Recognising that educational and social development takes place both within and outside school, guidance should include risk assessments for schools, staff, students and their families/carers, as well as strategies for targeted support, particularly for vulnerable children.

## 5. Communicate, consult and co-create

Governments must ensure effective, clear, and consistent communication with headteachers, staff, and parents to manage opening and keeping open schools in response to local conditions. Communication from government must be relevant, clear, and consistent. Government (national and local) must also listen to parents, schools and children on the appropriateness and feasibility of proposed measures, concerns and suggestions for overcoming challenges. Communication must address the reasons why it is important for children to return to school; the conditions under which it is safe to do so; exactly what they need to do in order to maintain safety (including travel to school and behaviour at school gates as well as behaviour in school); the steps they should take if anyone in the family has symptoms or is a contact of someone with symptoms. Making schools safe must be a partnership that addresses the very real concerns that both parents, children and staff have about the return to school.

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**Following the science**