

Back to school – but for how long?

By Emily Chesson, Intern, Centre for Brexit Studies

This month marks the most peculiar, unknown and apprehensive start to an academic year in decades, with children returning to school in the UK dividing opinion to say the least.

But should parents have been put in a position where they had to make the decision to send their children back to school? Is returning to school what is best for children's futures, as well as their mental health? Are we trying to return to 'normal' too soon and what impact could a second spike have on schools once again?

This year, school children have missed out on up to four months of education. Now, one of the government's top priorities is to get schools, colleges and universities back to an element of normality by Christmas. But, until then, schools are implementing many adaptations, including social bubbles, staggered start and finish times and overall a lot of confusion for parents and students. This could be the beginning of a long road to the recovery of education.

I imagine the majority of parents after lockdown felt very divided over having to send their child or children back to school. On the one hand, families have come together and have been given a unique opportunity in being able to spend so much time together. On the other, this extra time at home has put a big strain on parents. Having to juggle home schooling whilst tackling their other priorities of work, childcare and household upkeep is a massive task. The new academic year has potentially been a relief in some way, and parents could be relieved of some of those tasks.

The obligatory 'first day back to school' photos came through thick and fast on social media as a lot of parents cried, smiled and reminisced on the lockdown of 2020, sending their little ones back to the unknown of the new schooling we see today. I believe the majority of parents sent their child back to school believing it was the right way for the world and economy to move into life after COVID-19. Do we think social distancing can really happen in schools? In my opinion,

this cannot be entirely possible, but I am sure the teachers will try their best and social bubbles will be adhered to as best as they can.

The government are trying to reduce the risk of spreading as much as possible and social bubbles in schools is the only way they seem doable. Smaller circles mixing, different break times and less people in the corridor does minimise the number of children passing one another on a day-to-day basis.

Returning to school after months away was no doubt scary for children and parents alike, having to go back to a new way of school life and parents sending their children into school where they will be at potentially more risk. But children need social interaction and it's no doubt abundantly clear that children suffered in lockdown by not having their friends and age groups to learn from and play with. It was hard enough not being able to leave the house, let alone not be able to see your friends who at these pinnacle stages in children's lives which plays a massive role on their growing up.

From my stepbrothers and my cousins, I know that many children struggled with not seeing their friends and having that social element in their lives. This may be why Young Minds charity has set up a campaign called Beyond Tomorrow in order to limit the long-term impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on young people's mental health. The campaign is calling on the government to take urgent action and if changes are made, this could be a positive step in taking care of children's mental health, which has been tested during the pandemic.

I do see the benefits of schools being open and trying these new ways of life going forward in 2020. Pros for the economy will be having teachers back in school and teaching our children. For the younger children, they needed to get back to learn and develop social and academic skills and, for the older generation, it is pivotal to prepare for examinations, working life and further education. No one wants to see another GCSE or A Level year where they can't sit their exams.

According to the NASUWT teaching union, three in ten schools which completed a survey on teachers going back to school said they believe budgetary constraints will affect their schools' ability to reopen safely and as schools have to reopen this could make many teachers

anxiety and stress levels rise. The National Education Union have also written to the Prime Minister in the last week to express their concerns on schools remaining open despite coronavirus cases rising by 60%.

With already 300 schools in the UK in less than a week of reopening having positive COVID-19 tests and year group social bubbles have been sent home to isolate, maybe a new plan is needed for schools to move forward in the time of a pandemic. Potentially, this could be back to online teaching until cases reduce.

But surely, for this to work effectively, all online teaching needs to be interactive to allow students to stay engaged. If we return to no strict routine for children who are in critical stages of their development, they may end up years behind in progress.

For parents to continue to work, for the sake of the economy and if there's any chance of us returning to 'normal' in the next year, it is crucial that education's approach to the pandemic is dealt with correctly before it's too late.