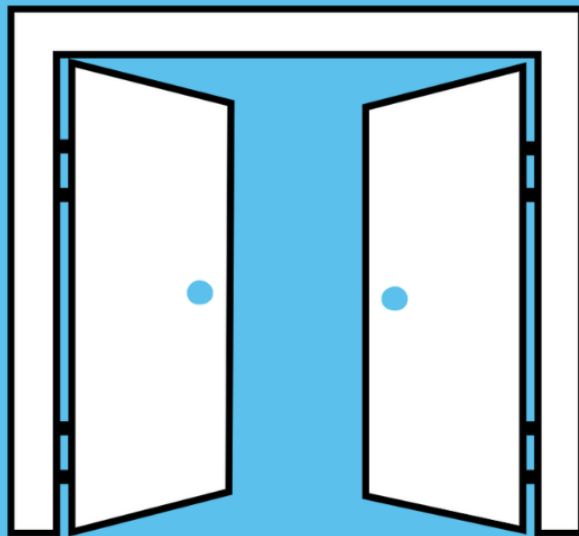


**A ROUNDTABLE CONVERSATION**



# **FULLY REOPENING SCHOOLS AFTER LOCKDOWN**

**BY BEN BROWN  
@EDROUNDTABLES**



## Forward

The following material is a summary of a roundtable conversation discussing some of the issues around fully reopening schools post lockdown. It is not intended to be a final solution but to provide suggestions for possible actions and encourage wider debate.

Huge thanks go to those who participated in the discussion. If you wish to participate in similar conversations then make sure to follow @edroundtables on Twitter.

The conversation took place on 21st April 2020 with contributions from:

Jen Grotier, Kate Bish, Lesley Gardner, Ian Toon, David Metcalf, Nicola Forster, Ricky, Coral, Janey, Angela Lee Hill

Additional thanks to Aly Potts & Steve Warner who provided extra input.

## Context

In this case, the focus was on the issues experienced by schools in supporting learning at home.

The discussion was broad and covered a number of areas, most of which are covered in this document.

I have tried to organise the ideas and comments into a more coherent piece than the original transcript and hope that you enjoy reading it.

I apologise to any of those involved if I have misunderstood any of the conversation, these mistakes are mine – don't hesitate to offer clarification.



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## Introduction

Schools are not closed, but they are not fully open either. When they will be is hard to predict, whether it is June or September, or potentially even later. Ideally, schools will be given more notice than they were when they closed – and preferably with proper notice not a press conference announcement.

Regardless of when they open, schools do have some experiences to draw on. After all, we open schools after every holiday – the Autumn term is perhaps most comparable and the most useful place to start from.

However, it will not be a normal reopening.

The conversation covered a whole range of issues to be considered and offered potential solutions to some of them.

Although transition was touched on, the depth of conversation needed around this means that an additional roundtable was scheduled to cover this topic and the thoughts and suggestions will be included in a follow-up document.

Two areas for work were identified – work to be done before opening, much of which is ongoing, and practicalities of opening, which were very problematic and context-based.



## Before Opening

Preparation for opening in the autumn term is usually extensive, the same is true for post lockdown opening. Several issues were raised which require careful consideration and action before schools open, many of them based around the relationships of the school and the community that it represents.



## Parent Anxiety

There is a lot of fear about the virus and whether schools are safe to open.

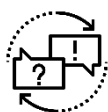
School leaders will have to do a lot of reassurance of parents to ensure that absence is not an issue.

Schools reported that prior to the lockdown parents removed their children and attendances plummeted. It was noted that minority communities, particularly those with ties to

Europe withdrew their children very quickly.

Building trust in the safety of the school won't happen overnight and communication with parents about what schools are planning to do to keep children safe will be an essential part of this.

Sharing risk assessments (in a simple and easy to understand format) could be a way to do this.



## Language Barriers

If communicating with parents and communities is essential, one of the challenges raised was communicating with parents whose first language is not English.

Schools without access to translation services could face

a battle when getting their message across to parents.

Reaching out to the wider community and speaking with community leaders could be an important action.

This applies to all schools that serve tight-knit communities where trust in authority is low.

It was noted that some authorities and schools will have better access to translation services than others and this is an opportunity to reach out and support each other regardless of location.



## **Staff Safety**

Staff are concerned, messages from the government have been mixed, changing from “when it is safe” to “when it is right”. This is a big distinction and has undermined trust in the government.

School leaders are in a very difficult position. They have the safety and well being of their staff to consider but are also public servants who have a duty to the wider public.

They have to trust the government, difficult as it may be and follow the guidance regarding the reopening of the school.

One comment also suggested that text messaging may be a better form of communication as some phones change the language of the texts that are received.

An English text sent to one family was received in Tamil. How widely spread this is? would need further investigation.

Staff will fall into different categories (and maybe in more than one), from those that are shielding to those that have keyworkers at home, from those that vulnerable family members to those that can't wait to get back into school.

Each category will have different concerns that will have to be addressed.

Leaders will have to address all of these concerns to the best of their ability. Sharing of risk assessments and wide discussion before the schools open is essential. There will be no one size fits all solution.



## **Wellbeing of Children**

Wellbeing during lockdown is a huge concern, which has been discussed before.

Whether it is experiencing domestic violence or abuse, or suffering from social anxiety or online bullying and peer abuse. Children will have lots of concerns about returning to school.

The discussion identified a need to “pre-load” wellbeing for all children, it may not be the ones that we have

identified as vulnerable that need it most.

Doing this early will reduce the anxiety that children have about their return to schools and “normality”.

The how is more challenging, especially given the challenges of communication and reaching those you need to reach, but giving them something to look forward to will reduce the anxieties that they experience when the time comes for schools to reopen.



## **Curriculum Planning**

Despite all the hard work that has been done over the past year or so on curriculum development, the curriculum will have to change.

Consider the differences in learning that will have taken place throughout the lockdown period. We will need to respond to what they have actually learned, not what they have been given to learn.

Learning at home is very different from learning in school after all.

Schools which have set realistic expectations for learning will probably manage this better.

The curriculum plan will also need to allow for some SEMH, some children will need this more than others, but it will need to be planned for.

Key to the curriculum plan will be identifying where the children are and what they

know as informally as possible. Baselining and testing should be avoided.

Some children will have been unable to access online resources at all, for a variety of reasons, which were discussed in the previous roundtable document – Realistic Expectations of Learning at Home.

Allowances for the differences between those who have been on-site and those who have not will also have to be made.

Keyworker children may need more support due to the potential for additional trauma from separation or even death.

Their parents will have been exposed to a greater risk than others and that will have an impact on the emotional wellbeing.



**CPD**

There is likely to be a need for support with bereavement and other SEMH issues. Anticipating this need may require additional training for staff. Allowing time for some online training for key staff may prove

In addition, as highlighted earlier, not all children may return to school immediately, or a phased return may limit access to school-based learning.

Rebuilding the school community should be high on the agenda.

A project-based approach that brings all students together would work well in primary schools and if identified early, can provide something for children to look forward to.

There were some concerns that any wellbeing or SEMH work doesn't become too focussed as there is still a danger of a second wave of the virus, so care does need to be taken not to scare or worry younger children.

beneficial once schools are fully re-opened.

There may be a need for more staff to be first aid or safeguarding trained to the necessary levels.



## **Practicalities of Re-Opening**

Fully opening schools with all the measures necessary to keep people safe will be a challenge, if not impossible. Close attention will be paid to countries such as Denmark and Germany, which are in the process of doing just that as I write this.

The discussion here was again very wide-ranging covering a number of concerns and possible solutions to them.



## **Staffing**

Depending on when schools re-open, staffing could be an issue.

Some staff are shielding for 12 weeks which means they would be unavailable for a June start.

If these are key staff in areas such as first aid or safeguarding, for example, this could cause compliance issues for the schools.

Staff anxiety, which was discussed earlier, will still be a factor, regardless of any reassurances prior to opening.

Staff want to know that they are safe, allowing PPE to be worn or purchasing PPE if it is available could help mitigate some of these worries.

Union Advice. Some staff may still feel unsafe despite reassurances and seek union advice. Depending on the circumstances, unions may advise them not to attend school.

Continuing to rota staff, if possible, to mitigate their exposure to potential sources of the virus would probably be wise.





## Pupil Numbers

Without a doubt, the biggest challenges that schools face will be around the number of pupils that attend and social distancing.

- How do they all fit in the building?
- How do you allow them access to toilets, breaks and food?
- How do you organise transitions and the start and end of the day?

The solutions to these are not simple and are incredibly context-dependent.

- Is the school building fit for its new purpose?
- How old are the children?
- How do they get to school?
- How do you clean everything?
- How do you keep everyone safe?

Suggested actions included:

Reducing the number of children in school at any one time – offering a reduced timetable to targeted groups.

Half days or half weeks are both options, or less time if the

school can't manage larger numbers safely.

Staggering start and end times to reduce crowding during the start and end of the school days, including numbers on buses.

Marking the playground with 2m marks as waiting points for parents. Even consider marking the pavement outside of the school and allowing one in one out at the school gate if the playground is full.

During transitions, teachers could move, rather than children. Or, if the building is suitable, a one-way system.

This could be a limiting factor on the timetable, there may only be so many specialist rooms available.

Ideally, the school would be deep-cleaned each evening, although there is a cost implication for this, a less costly method could be to make pupils responsible for it at the end of each session/day.



## **Routines**

If schools can only re-open partially, the re-establishment of routines could be very difficult.

In fact, all routines, whether school or home will be very different.

Allowing an adjustment period will be necessary, new routines for partial opening will have to be established and then

changed once it is considered safe for “normal” activity to be resumed.

This could cause anxiety for a number of students, particularly those for whom a regular routine is essential. Preparation for these students will need to be given careful thought.



## **Expectations**

Without school staff to remind children about what is expected in schools, children will have forgotten.

It should be remembered that they have all had very different experiences. Some have been at home, some will have been in school, none of them will have been experiencing normal school so they will all be out of practice.

Make allowances for this, learning behaviour will have to be relearned and practised.

Getting along together is not something that they have done for a while.

They will need to catch up with each other and share their experiences.

They need to re-establish their relationships with each other and with you.

Smile and re-connect with them, they will re-engage with their learning and will re-train their learning behaviours to meet expectations once more.



## Wellbeing

Wellbeing should be at the core of what schools are doing.

Virtually every school community will have lost members to the coronavirus. Recognising this and helping pupils and staff move beyond this will be challenging at times.

Bereavement counselling may need to be offered to some, others will need support to overcome increased anxieties around a variety of areas, illness, attachment or other trauma.

Empathise. Don't judge, you don't know how they are feeling and children may not be the same as they were before the lockdown.

School may not be normal for some time but, there will be a desire to get there as soon as possible. Don't push it.

Schools will come through this and normality will return, be positive, look for the best and take it slow and steady.

Although children will have been looking forward to a return to school, it may be difficult for them to be around large numbers of people.

Be especially aware of children with sensory needs, who may find this transition extremely upsetting.

Remember, you are dealing with people and not data. Don't try and catch up with "lost" learning immediately. Instead, discover what they have learned and celebrate that.

It is likely that you will be "off-curriculum" initially, while you assess where everyone is – including staff.



## **The Curriculum**

Learning will need to continue, but until the conditions for optimal learning can be met expectations about how much can be learned should be lowered.

Partial timetables and reduced numbers of children in school are likely to remain the norm if social distancing is still in place.

Wellbeing and other SEMH topics will need to be covered. The school community will need to be rebuilt.

There will be gaps in learning, not all pupils will have had access or have chosen to access everything that was available for them to learn during the lockdown.

Don't sweat it. Every school is in the same position. Those schools which attempted to push their school day relentlessly may find that the gaps are bigger, particularly for those that were excluded from online learning.

Remember, education is not a competition. Don't treat it like one.

Suggestions for the first few weeks, with some work prior to the re-opening, included a project-based approach to which the whole school can contribute.

A performance, or an art project. This will provide everyone, including parents and staff, something to look forward to.

Further discussion on how to ensure the curriculum is responsive to the developing emotional needs of pupils and staff has been scheduled.

There is no single right way, but there is a danger of there being a wrong way.

There are no shortcuts to success. Invest the time needed.

There is only one shot at this, let's get it right!



## **Safeguarding**

Vigilance regarding safeguarding issues will need to be heightened.

Children have been “out of sight” for a long time.

There has been a significant rise in domestic abuse reported, with children either witnessing or being on the receiving end.

In addition, they have spent significantly more time online,

opening the door to bullying from their peers or exposure to unsuitable images and materials or even grooming.

Making sure that there are safe spaces available for children to talk about their experiences with enough trained staff to support will be very important.

Behaviour is more likely to be an indicator rather than any disclosures and it may occur in children that we don't consider to be vulnerable.



## **Headteachers**

Much consideration has been given to supporting staff throughout the covid-19 lockdown, and that includes to be the case during re-opening.

However, headteachers have been under extraordinary amounts of pressure and stress, often leading from the front.

Difficult decisions have had to be made in response to anxious parents and staff and a

situation that has been hard to predict.

Government guidance has been less than clear at times and some of their actions around FSM have been less than helpful.

Governors and MATs have a duty to support and help their heads in any way they can. Perhaps reducing other pressures where at all possible.

## Summary

This has been one of the hardest documents I have had to write. There is so much that we don't know and with that level of uncertainty, it is hard to know what to do and when to do it.

The conversation around which this document was based was incredibly open and honest and the frustration and worry clear.

To summarise the conversation is almost impossible, making those decisions that you believe are right for your community is all that you can do. Prioritise wellbeing and safety and you won't be far wrong.

Further materials on Transition and Curriculum are being discussed and the write-ups will follow as soon as possible.

If you have had experiences of the issues discussed and have found potential solutions, then get in touch @edroundtables on Twitter.

If you have an educational topic you would like to discuss with your peers in a confidential space. Then contact @edroundtables or visit [www.edrt.co.uk](http://www.edrt.co.uk)



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