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## We Don't Need No Education: Coronavirus and the Battle for Our Children's Welfare

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson's plans for a phased reopening of schools has sparked a bitter row between the government on the one hand, and many (mainly Labour controlled) councils on the other. Under the phased reopening, children in nursery and pre-school, Reception and Years 1 and 6 could begin returning to primary school first on 1 June. At secondary school and college, Years 10 and 12 would return first. But many fear that the reopening of schools has come too soon, with too little planning and too little guidance on how to maintain the safety of staff, pupils and parents. Amongst the dissenters are the NASUWT, and councils such as Bury, Liverpool, Hartlepool, Wirral, Gateshead and Calderdale.

Williamson's announcement comes on the back of concerns expressed by the Institute for Fiscal Studies about the widening educational inequalities occurring between children from the richest and poorest families, with data suggesting that by the end of this month, children in better-off families will have received a week and half more home learning than children in the poorest households during the closures.

With attempts to return people to work likely to be seriously hampered if parents are forced to continue to look after their children at home, it is easy to see why the reopening of schools is at the top of the governments agenda for coming out of lockdown. In addition to missing out on education, there will be children who are missing out on food and meals, children who are missing out on socialising and friendships, and children for whom school is normally a place of sanctuary.

Amidst the debate about the date for the re-opening of schools and which year groups should be prioritised however, one thing seems to have been seriously lacking. That is, the purpose for which children are being returned to school. With the likelihood that schools may well have to shut again in the Autumn or Winter in order to avoid a second spike in the pandemic, it would seem sensible to take any opportunity to return children to school to concentrate less on learning maths or English, and more on learning how to live life in lockdown. There could be a brief window of opportunity to teach children how to maintain friendships and relationships; how to manage

family conflict; how to look after their bodies and minds; and how to engage with school and on-line learning from a distance. Such a focus could help to build the resilience of children in any second lockdown and help to manage out and reduce any future inequalities.