

W Agenda Letters Opinion

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Learning is not the only priority when children go back to school on Monday, says Thrive's Lee Prichard

THE full reopening of schools in England on March 8 is a key step out of lockdown and towards a return to normal life. The last two months have been tough for parents, children and teachers with research from the Children's Commissioner for England revealing that a total of 840 million days of face-to-face schooling will have been lost by the time schools fully re-open.

This has meant a loss of routine, structure, friendships and activities for millions of children and a stressful juggling act for their parents who have had to combine working from home with homeschooling. Returning to school will be a big adjustment for everyone and, as a society, we need to recognise that there will be emotional fall-out from the disruption and uncertainties of the pandemic.

Children with existing mental health problems will undoubtedly have suffered while, for others, the last year will have meant additional pressures and a lack of routine that will have adversely affected their mental health. There have been more than 122,000 coronavirus deaths so far, which will mean loss and grief in almost every community. Teachers will be facing more than just disruption to their pupils' education. They will need to deal with young people who may be severely traumatised having endured bereavement, witnessed family arguments or even domestic abuse or been worried about financial stress because of redundancy or furlough in the family.

I hear about these concerns in my role as Head of UK Regional Development at Newton Abbot-based Thrive. We work nationwide, training teachers and other educational professionals to support children's emotional and mental wellbeing. I believe the only way that schools can respond to this challenge is to set aside the temptation to focus on lost attainment time and, instead, to prioritise helping children to re-adjust and settle back into the routine of school.

Taking the pressure off pupils - and themselves - will allow teachers to focus on helping children to recover emotionally so that, in due course, they can then consider attainment and what needs to be put in place to make progress with the curriculum. The lesson that self-care and rest are necessary after a stressful experience is a valuable one and I hope that schools will be encouraged to adopt this approach.

As a society, we have come to think of education as being about achievement in exams and assessments rather than the broader concept it actually is. Schools can offer pupils so much more than curriculum-based learning. They can, and should, give children the opportunity to understand their own processes so that they can respond to difficult situations rather than reacting through behaviour.

Taking this pause to focus on wellbeing would also benefit teachers. They, too, will have found the last few months difficult. As well as the demands of switching back to remote learning, possibly whilst homeschooling their own children, they may have had to contend with feedback from anxious parents worried about how much, or how little, their children are being given to do.

Allowing teachers to take time to rest and recover, while focusing on the wellbeing of their pupils is what they need, not a desperate race to the curriculum finish.

This approach would also give schools the opportunity to focus on the relationship between teacher and pupil. Teachers have a hugely important role to play in helping children to navigate their way through the confusing and difficult feelings that will come up around the pandemic.

Children can't learn properly unless they are calm and able to practice a level of emotional resilience. Once this is in place, a child can then think rationally about the situation they are in and to understand that there are things they can do to get their own needs met and to respond, instead of reacting.

We should be reassuring the children who may have struggled with online learning that by doing their best, they have done enough and that they will now be supported to re-engage with face-to-face learning without pressure or unreasonable expectations. Putting mental wellbeing ahead of the demands of the curriculum is a brave step that goes against much of the ethos of the modern education system.

But the reality is that social and emotional wellbeing is the foundation that learning is built on. If this foundation is not solid and well-established then children will be unable to move forward with attainment. As schools prepare to return, they have a real opportunity to help develop emotional literacy among our children - something that will help them to truly thrive in life.

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