

School closures: Note from SPI-B. [17 March 2020]

- In actions circulated yesterday, SPI-M and SPI-B were asked to provide comments on whether the health benefits of school closures could be outweighed by the effects of children being looked after by grandparents/childminders and/or pupils interacting socially in other locations. We have previously circulated a rapid evidence review available at: <https://osf.io/2txsr/> and we are aware that this has already been reviewed by SPI-M as part of their work on this question and discussed in their report.
- In its list of actions, SAGE also noted that it would consider alternatives to closure. One alternative sometimes discussed is a partial ‘dismissal,’ where-by most children are sent home from school, but the children of certain key workers (scope to be defined, but including NHS workers) are allowed to attend as a form of childcare. This allows NHS workers who might not otherwise be able to attend work, to do so.
- Members of SPI-B have not found a robust academic evidence base relating to the acceptability or social impact of dismissal vs closure¹. We do not know if the Department for Education might have any evidence. But based on our discussions, we highlight three issues that might be useful to consider:
 - It is possible that the public will accept that allowing schools to stay open to provide childcare for NHS workers is necessary, although we would emphasise our lack of data. We do not know if acceptance would extend to workers in other sectors. The perceived legitimacy of any measure, which will be influenced by clear explanation of the need and purpose for it, will be important.
 - The willingness of teachers to support a dismissal system should be considered. Consultation with teachers is recommended to discuss how to develop a suitable system for staffing and to identify and address the concerns that they may have.
 - It cannot be assumed that older children of key workers will come into schools even if they are open to them: they may consider it risky, not educational or less attractive than alternatives.

¹ Though for a useful discussion of various issues and solutions, see: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies/coronavirus-school-closures>