

Broader reopening of UK schools leads to spread of COVID-19 infections

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Education Minister Gavin Williamson has threatened parents and families who refuse to send their children back to school in September with fines, insisting that the directive announced by Prime Minister Boris Johnson last week is “compulsory.”

The threat of £60 fines per pupil, which double if not paid within 21 days, comes under conditions in which the latest Public Health England’s (PHE) statistics reveal that schools now register second in the outbreaks of acute respiratory infections.

The broadly opposed “wider opening” of schools began on June 1. Such was the opposition that the government was forced to limit it to nurseries, reception stage, year 1 and year 6, plus year 10 and year 12 on a de facto part-time basis, from June 15, with plans to open all primary schools in July scrapped.

The latest Public Health England Weekly COVID-19 Surveillance Report reveals that up to June 24, schools stand just below care homes, but above hospitals for infections. There has been an overall increase in detections outside hospitals, with the wider reopening of schools a contributing factor.

The report shows that the number of outbreaks in schools increased from 24 to 44 in a week—16 more than were recorded at hospitals. It confirms that the rise “coincides with wider school reopening” and criticises the lack of an expansion of “test and trace” systems meant to accompany the wider reopening of schools. Although a relatively small number, schools made up nearly 20 percent of “new acute respiratory outbreaks,” which rose from 199 to 223.

The doubling of infections in schools within a week, following a still limited reopening of schools, should send alarm bells ringing for those concerned with public safety. Not so for the Conservative government. The scientific evidence has not only been ignored but

met with belligerence and intimidation, with threats of fines for families who resist sending their children back to schools in September, with a deadly virus still in circulation.

The Surveillance Report shows that the week before schools started to open more widely, outbreaks did not rise above four. In the first week back alone, there were 14 outbreaks and 10 schools had to close in Lincolnshire. There were six school closures in Bradford and at least one each in Sheffield, Doncaster and Derby. There are no central statistics available, but 148 teachers have died of COVID-19.

The PHE report also states that “case detections remain highest in the north of the country and there have been increases in case detections outside of hospital testing in Yorkshire and Humber over the past 2 weeks. At a local authority level, activity was highest in parts of West Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and in Leicester.”

After 11 days of delays, Leicester was placed in “local lockdown” yesterday after 658 new cases have been recorded in the area of the city since mid-June. Five Leicester schools were shut last week: Moat Community College, in Highfields, Herrick Primary in Rushey Mead and Whitehall Primary, in Rowlatts Hill. They all closed to carry out a deep clean after members of staff tested positive for the virus.

Under these conditions, the government’s determination to continue with its deadly plan to reopen schools demonstrates its criminal indifference to the safety and lives of teachers, children, their families and their communities. The announcement to reopen all schools has not been followed by any official guidance on how this is to be achieved, which is scheduled to be announced at the end of the week. It is clear that the government is creating the conditions for the virus to

“let rip.”

Social distancing will not exist in schools. The government plans to place large groups of pupils in “bubbles” to ensure schools can take all pupils back at the start of the new academic year. But the term “bubble” is a fiction. Children will be back in classes of about 30 children in primary schools, as they were pre-pandemic. There will be no possibility to socially distance or avoid sharing classroom resources.

In secondary schools, the “bubbles” could number into the hundreds, including entire year groups of up to 400 in some of the larger schools. Such a term applied to the various ability and subject groups into which secondary pupils are broken up is meaningless from a safety perspective.

On June 11, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), the government advisory group, tweeted that in order to keep infections low in schools, “contact should be avoided between teaching staff and between pupils from different classes and especially different schools.” Head teachers responded by stating that the plan was “pure fantasy.”

There will be teachers whose partners work in different schools, teachers with children who attend different schools, children whose siblings attend different schools, of which the government and its advisers are well aware, but it will continue to allow the conditions for what Independent SAGE, a group of eminent scientists critical of the government, has defined as a “perfect storm” for the spreading of the virus.

Sir Jeremy Farrar, director of the Wellcome Trust and a member of SAGE, said that Britain was on a “knife edge” and likely to see an increase in coronavirus cases by July. He expressed concern that there would soon be a surge of new infections caused by lockdown restrictions being eased towards the end of May and anticipated that there will be “an increase in new cases over the coming weeks.” This will be the very point at which schools are being forcibly reopened.

Government advice is for more regular breaks during school times in order to have additional cleaning, but the Department for Education (DfE) confirmed this week that schools are “not eligible to make claims for any additional costs associated with more pupils returning to school.” This means schools will have to absorb all the additional costs from their existing

measly budgets.

The lifting of the lockdown, driven purely by “restarting the economy” in the interests of the rich at the expense of the lives of workers, can only be opposed through the independent action of the working class. The trade unions share responsibility for the deadly situation facing those being forced back into factories, offices and schools when it is not safe to do so.

The teaching unions repeat ad nauseam that schools should “only open when it is safe to do so,” but the reality is that they have ensured many schools are already open while the virus is still claiming lives and no vaccine or effective treatment yet exists. Their role is to dissipate the mass opposition that exists amongst educators and parents, who, through independent opposition, have forced the government to make U-turns such as delaying a wider reopening of schools, and the provision of free school meals over the summer.

This opposition to the reopening of schools must have a conscious political programme. It must be the spearhead of an independent movement of the working class against the Johnson government and its murderous back-to-work campaign. We urge educators to study our statement below and contact the SEP for advice and assistance in setting up action committees in your school.



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