

Almost half of UK coronavirus infections in schools, colleges and universities

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A series of surveys and reports have exposed the disastrous effects on teachers and children of school reopenings. Figures from the latest Public Health England's COVID-19 epidemiology surveillance summary show that educational settings now account for 45 percent of all positive cases in the UK. This is the highest level of infection of any sector of society.

The report is based on data from week 39 (between 21 August and 27 September 2020) and, for some indicators, daily data up to 29 September 2020.

Around 30,000 school pupils are infected according to the Office for National Statistics, with its October 2 statement reporting “clear evidence” in recent weeks “of an increase in the number of people testing positive for COVID-19, with the current rates highest in teenagers and young adults.” The fastest increases among school ages are the 7 to 11 year groups and the 12 to 24 year group.

According to the ToryFibs twitter group—which collates a daily tally of school infections based on reports from school websites, local news reports and National Health Service updates—as of Saturday 2,576 schools across the UK have been infected with COVID-19. Nearly 2,000 are in England (1,909), 337 are in Wales, 203 in Scotland, and 127 in Northern Ireland. ToryFibs reported 595 live coronavirus clusters within educational settings throughout England, including over 100 in the capital. London councils, of all political stripes, have been concealing accurate figures, resulting in a massive underreporting on school infections in the capital.

The Boycott Unsafe Schools web site has produced a valuable map showing the evidence of infections at over 2,000 schools from every corner of the country.

According to the *Manchester Evening News*, 369 schools across Greater Manchester—the third largest

regional authority in England—have confirmed they have pupils and staff self-isolating. It only reported those cases it knew of. “The true figure is expected to be much higher.”

This horrific situation is the direct result of the government's forced reopening of unsafe schools, to reopen the wider economy amid a deadly pandemic.

According to a survey carried out the week ending September 25 among UK teaching staff by the *TES (Times Educational Supplement)*, almost half said they felt “drained and exhausted” just weeks into the new term. Around one third of the 7,582 school staff surveyed, including teachers, teaching assistants, and senior leaders, said they were “just about coping” and 15 percent described themselves as “physically and mentally on the brink.”

One school leader told *TES*, “We're in a climate where everyone is on edge and stressed out and worried the whole time. If I'm still in this job by Christmas, I'm going to be amazed. I've had enough.”

Sinéad Mc Brearty, CEO of charity Education Support, said its own findings based on a YouGov survey, published September 17, revealed that half of teachers suffered a decline in their mental health during the initial stage of the pandemic. The findings extrapolated from research carried out with over 3,000 education professionals in schools and colleges.

Commenting on the failure of the government to develop a functioning test and trace system, Mc Brearty said, “Schools are left to pick up the pieces whilst staff and students are forced to self-isolate and wait for a golden ticket to a test appointment... If we are reckless with the health of the education workforce, we cannot expect children and young people to have the support they need to get through this difficult year.”

On September 14, at a meeting with the Department

for Education, the Chartered College of Teaching warned that teachers and school leaders were already exhausted just two weeks into the new term. Cited were concerns around testing for COVID-19, staff and pupil absences, and uncertainty regarding next year's exams. Nine out of ten teachers of GCSE and A levels say their students have fallen behind, with many demanding a postponement of exams.

In the last week of September, the NASUWT teaching union conducted a survey of its 6,445 members which found that 86 percent felt their workload had greatly increased with an expectation that they develop remote learning in addition to their current duties. Over half said they now go without regular breaks. Fully 83 percent believed that the government was not providing the necessary support during the pandemic.

On October 3, a survey by the National Education Union (NEU) found that 84 percent of respondents did not trust the government to keep schools safe, to protect workers, to support vulnerable or disadvantaged children, or to ensure adequate safety and resources around exams and assessment.

The trade unions are reporting the results of their own treachery. In alliance with the Labour Party, they have played the critical role in enforcing the Tory government's school reopening drive.

In recent days the government has announced onerous new conditions on the allocation of already rationed laptops for school pupils. If a school is operating a rota system to limit school attendance or has fewer than 15 pupils self-isolating, it cannot now access laptops or other devices from the government. The government is also threatening to use powers under the draconian Coronavirus Act against schools struggling to provide adequate levels of remote learning!

These surveys and studies disprove the government's dangerous and deceptive propaganda campaign that insisted schools were "COVID secure". While life inside schools becomes ever more unbearable due to increasing numbers of pupils and staff falling ill or self-isolating, the governments' herd immunity policy means the virus is being allowed to spread unchecked throughout society.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is opposed to the reopening of unsafe schools and puts forward a programme with which educators can fight back against

the threat to their lives and that of pupils.

The SEP's August 8 statement, For a general strike against the reopening of schools, called on "all education workers to mobilise against the Johnson government's plan to open schools in September despite the threat to health and lives. This homicidal policy can only be challenged through an independent mobilisation, uniting workers in education with all sections of the working class in a general strike movement against the ruling elite."

The statement explained that the ruling elite's "crocodile tears are shed in order to transform schools into holding pens so that their parents can be driven back to work in unsafe conditions. The price will also be paid by education workers and children, whose surroundings will be just as dangerous as they are on public transport, and in factories, offices and shops. There will be no social distancing and no personal protective equipment (PPE), with primary school classes of 30, 'bubbles' of 240 in secondary schools, no school closures if there is an outbreak, and fines for parents who do not comply."

In issuing a call for a general strike, the SEP demanded:

- Keep all schools closed until the virus is eradicated! With the virus spiralling out of control across the UK, in-person instruction cannot be done safely.
- Full funding for public education and online instruction! High-speed internet access, food distribution, mental health care, special education supports, and all other resources needed to provide the best quality remote learning, must be guaranteed to every student and education worker.

The SEP, in line with the sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, has established an educators' rank-and-file safety committee in opposition to the murderous policy of the ruling class. We call on educators to join the rank and file committee and attend our online meetings.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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