

UK government forces schools to stay open as infections continue to surge

Tom Pearce

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The Conservative government ended its one-month national lockdown last week with the sole aim of boosting the economy before Christmas, placing countless lives in danger.

Unlike the first lockdown earlier in the year, the most recent excluded schools, with predictably disastrous consequences for the spread of COVID-19. Now the government is using special powers contained in the Coronavirus Act 2020 to prevent schools from taking action to mitigate the dangers.

Since the start of the September term, the infection rate among secondary school pupils, aged 11-16, has soared 50-fold. One in 10 pupils of all ages are off school—and one in five secondary school pupils—either because they themselves are a confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19 or because they have been a potential contact of a positive case. The government's propaganda line, supported by the Labour Party, that schools are "COVID secure", is in tatters.

In a damning report, Independent Sage, a group of scientists who have criticised aspects of the government's COVID-19 response, have called for "urgent action" on outbreaks in schools. The group's chair, former government chief scientific adviser Professor Sir David King, warned that the risk facing families was heightened by the prospect of multiple generations of families coming together over five days this Christmas under the government's relaxed restrictions.

The report cited new figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) which compared the infection rates among 11 to 16-year-olds on September 1, just before schools reopened, versus November 21. It showed a staggering increase from 0.04 percent at the start of the school year to 2.16 percent—54 times higher over a 12-week period. The rate of positivity actually peaked at 2.28 percent on November 16 and 17. There are also currently 1,225 people in the 6-17 age bracket in hospital due to COVID-19.

King stated, "It is now clear that secondary school students can be infected and infect each other and adults, and this is at last acknowledged by the government's official advisers

in Sage".

A recent major study by Imperial College London that analysed the impact of the second national lockdown up to November 24 found that the prevalence of infection increased among school-aged children throughout. They were the only age group to see an increase. The study's authors found "an increase in weighted prevalence in participants aged 5 to 12 years and those aged 13 to 17 years, i.e. among school-aged children, but a decline in all adult age groups."

Infected children are very often asymptomatic, making them hard to identify and quarantine from more vulnerable sections of the population. Sedbergh School in Westmorland suffered an outbreak in November and carried out mass testing of its school community. Headteacher Daniel Harrison reported, "The results show that we had 149 positive cases amongst the pupils who took the test, this represents 28% of the whole school."

Increasing numbers of school leaders are raising fears that students and staff will have to be asked to self-isolate over the Christmas period.

The *Times Educational Supplement* (TES) spoke to Bolton headteacher Patrick Ottley-O'Connor, who had tweeted, "Our staff and students are showing great resilience and working hard but there's a real possibility that I'll be telling students during the final week of term that they'll have to self isolate for 14 days over the Christmas break. We've currently got 452 out of 1,350 students self-isolating."

Ottley-O'Connor told TES, "[E]very week we have had between 300 and 450 pupils self-isolating at a time and I don't see any sign of that changing."

Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, told TES that this was a growing concern among his members. One had told him, "We will almost certainly be telling some families that their child needs to isolate for 14 days, and this will include Christmas. The really interesting thing is whether families will adhere to that—I suspect some will not, and so we will have infections spreading wider as a consequence."

Instead of acknowledging the pleas of scientist and school workers; the strain that schools are under; and the impact of rising infection levels over the Christmas period, the government is blocking lifesaving action by educators who are trying to avoid a catastrophe.

Multi Academy Chain, the Focus Trust, announced in November that it would close early for Christmas to try and ensure “no-one is forced to self isolate [at Christmas] because of someone they have come into contact with at school”. The Trust said its 15 schools, based in the north west of England and West Yorkshire, would shut December 11, with lost teaching days to be made up later in the year. Since September, 28 percent of children and 38 percent of staff across these schools have been forced to spend time self-isolating.

Within a week, the government intervened to reverse the decision, repeating the bipartisan mantra that it is a “national priority” to keep schools open, whatever the costs. The government were able to use draconian powers awarded by the Coronavirus Act 2020 to forbid the Focus Trust from closing early. This Act was rushed through parliament in March, backed by Labour when Jeremy Corbyn was party leader. Using its emergency powers, the education secretary can “give temporary continuity directions requiring schools to take certain actions, including staying open”.

The Act was renewed in September, again with Labour backing under new leader Sir Keir Starmer.

A few days later, on November 27, new national guidance for “education and childcare settings (excluding universities)” was released to forbid schools taking even the most minimal action to prevent the spread of the virus. The Department of Education (DfE) declared that schools must not implement any public health measures restricting school attendance without the “explicit agreement” of the DfE. Rota systems limiting the number of people attending school at any one time are banned completely.

In utter disdain for the crisis that educators find themselves in, and with unequalled cynicism, the DfE insisted its “contingency framework” is designed “as a means of reducing transmission within settings and the wider community” and that it therefore “should not be used to address operational challenges, including staff shortages”.

Schools will be forced to carry on regardless of staff absence. The DfE has said they can consider options including, “Using staff, such as trainees, more flexibly, using supply staff or recruiting both permanent and short-term staff via the Teaching Vacancies Service.” These “options” either do not exist, cannot be afforded on schools’ already devastated budgets, or will further undermine already woefully inadequate measures for containing the virus.

The problem of teacher shortages in many UK regions is making the situation unsustainable, with some schools having to close their doors completely. On twitter, parent, @Michellethomp1 explained: “Just got an email from my kids’ school. It’s closing for two weeks due to Covid-related staff shortages. They basically have no staff to operate safely. This is a large secondary school with nearly 1,400 kids. Why is no one mentioning the schools in the media?”

The real reason for the government’s demand that schools remain open in the teeth of such a crisis has nothing to do with concern for pupils’ wellbeing. It is rooted in the ruling elite’s relentless prioritisation of profits over lives. Closing schools for a week before the Christmas holidays would hinder the national drive to flood the high streets with Christmas shoppers and hit the operations of the corporations by keeping parents at home. Under the government’s “herd immunity” programme, workers and their families must continue to risk infection to boost the bottom line of big business.

There exists a vast opposition to this homicidal policy. A petition calling on the government to reclose schools and colleges in order to “protect teachers and pupils and their families” climbed from 280,000 signatures to more than 417,000 this month. Another petition to “save Christmas”, not by having millions of people herded together in shops, but by allowing schools to move to online learning from December 9, increased its signatures from 20,000 to over 120,000 between November 20 and November 30.

This sentiment finds no expression in the teacher’s unions, who are allowing the government to enforce its agenda, even as the Tories push for clinically extremely vulnerable staff (CEV) to return to school sites now the second lockdown has ended.

Only now, months after the first deaths of education staff began to be announced, is the National Education Union (NEU) even bothering to call on the government to release figures on how many “teachers and support staff have caught coronavirus, been hospitalised or died”. It remains resolutely opposed to any co-ordinated industrial action to prevent escalating deaths among its membership.



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