

# Local reports of COVID-19 deaths in UK schools confirm concealed impact of pandemic

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COVID-19 deaths in Britain continue to mount with another 599 fatalities reported Monday. This brings the death toll as measured by the government to almost 90,000 (89,860). However, the true figure, counting cases where coronavirus was noted on the death certificate, passed the 100,000 mark last week.

Among the deaths are those of educators.

The ToryFibs twitter group on —which collates school infections based on reports from school websites, local news reports and National Health Service updates—published a list of eight school staff who have died of COVID-19 during the months of November and December.

No similar reporting is taking place in any national media outlet.

The government's propaganda that schools were "COVID-safe" was dealt a devastating blow when the Tories were forced to include schools in the latest national lockdown. Prior to Prime Minister Boris Johnson's January 4 lockdown announcement, the government had even threatened legal action against those schools intending to close due to high infection rates.

The government's hand was forced as it became clear that school staff and parents had begun to boycott schools.

The school closures have come four months after the full reopening of schools in September following the first national lockdown, a deadly endeavour predicated on a policy of "herd immunity" that has led to tens of thousands of infections and a spate of deaths in schools.

Even now, nurseries and special educational needs schools remain open and many "closed schools" are reporting up to 70 percent attendance due to new criteria around children of essential workers as more of the economy is opened up. Many poorer children are also being forced into classrooms due to an inability to access online learning.

According to recent data supplied to *TES* (*Times*

*Educational Supplement*) by the NASUWT teaching union, virus rates among school staff in some areas are currently as high as four times the corresponding local authority average.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has not updated its published data on the deaths of educators since June, (before the full reopening of schools after the first national lockdown). That data revealed that 148 education workers in the UK had by then died of COVID-19.

Below is a summary of the deaths of school staff that have been reported locally or on social media in the last months.

- On November 11, Bob Dick, 72, former head of art at Wintringham school in Grimsby, died of COVID-19. He had taught art for around 40 years. According to the *Grimsby Telegraph*, he had suffered a stroke and later tested positive for the virus while receiving treatment.

- On December 4, a funeral service was held in Blackpool for Michael Haigh, 60, who died of COVID-19 the previous month. Haigh began working as a school site supervisor at three schools run by the Blessed Edward Bamber Catholic Multi Academy Trust in April 2016. Having suffered a heart attack in 2013, he began shielding in March during the national lockdown, but returned to school on June 21, during the partial reopening of schools.

In April, Haigh's father, Neville Haigh, 88, a former civil engineer, also died from contracting the virus.

- On November 28, Cath Strangwood, 57, a support assistant at Moor Park Primary and Nursery school in Bispham, Blackpool, lost her fight for life to COVID-19. She contracted the virus after returning to work to look after the children of key workers during the first national lockdown. Moor Park Primary School was forced to shut temporarily following a recent outbreak, when seven members of staff contracted the virus.

- *Kent Online* reported on the death of Michele Cockrill, 62, a teaching assistant in Milton Regis, near

Sittingbourne in Kent. She tested positive and died at home on November 22, a day after paramedics had visited her. She is not thought to have had any underlying health conditions.

Cockrill's son said, "We're furious mum was still allowed to be working at a school at 62. In a lot of other areas, schools are closing. Why wasn't mum shielded or furloughed because of her age? Why has the council not been tougher and overruled any government judgement and closed schools and colleges, knowing what the score is in Swale? ... We feel that this was a completely avoidable death. It's a real failure of the system."

· Nick Hague, 53, headteacher at Marner primary school in Tower Hamlets, London died from COVID-19 on December 23. According to London's *Evening Standard*, Hague had tested positive for the virus at the start of the Christmas holidays. It is thought that he had then "completed a period of isolation and was recovering from the illness before he travelled to stay with his mother in Nottingham for Christmas, where he died unexpectedly." Hague had been forced to close the school early for the Christmas break as so many staff were ill or self-isolating.

· Jan Docker, 55, a special educational needs co-ordinator at Stillness Junior School in Lewisham, London died on Christmas Day. Believing that she was recovering from the virus, she developed severe breathing problems and called an ambulance at midday. She was admitted to Croydon University Hospital where she died six hours later, her family told the *Evening Standard*. Docker had no significant underlying health issues and had been fit and working before she contracted the virus, according to family members.

· The *Northern Echo* reported the death of secondary school teacher, Paul Hilditch, 55, on December 27. Hilditch, who taught engineering and technology for four years at Conyers School, in Yarm, North Yorkshire, had been in hospital for two weeks before dying of the virus.

· On December 29, the *Island Echo* reported that Lynne Morgan, a learning support assistant at Christ the King College in Newport on the Isle of Wight, had "caught COVID-19 early in December and eventually succumbed to pneumonia during the early hours of Monday morning. She had an underlying health condition which left her more vulnerable." It was announced last week that military helicopters could be used within days to airlift coronavirus patients from the Isle of Wight, as the "astronomical" rise in infections has all but overwhelmed the island's only hospital.

· *Essex Live* reported the death from COVID-19 of

Stuart Hall, head of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) at St Clere's School in Stanford-le-Hope, Thurrock, Essex on December 31. Hall had joined the school at the beginning of the year and had taught many of the pupils in ICT and Business Studies.

Other fatalities from COVID-19 in schools have only surfaced on social media platforms, such as the recent death from the virus of Ray Phillips, 72, who was nearing retirement as a site supervisor at Mansel Primary school in Sheffield.

On December 3, the headteacher of La Retraite Roman Catholic Girl's school, in the London Borough of Lambeth, notified all parents at the school of the death of a Year 11 student from the virus on the school web site. The student was due back in school, having seemingly recovered from contracting the virus when she died.

Her death confirms the warnings of many scientists and the *World Socialist Web Site* that children are not only vectors for the spread of COVID-19 but can succumb to the virus themselves.

The fact that there is no systematic collation of infections and deaths from COVID-19 in schools is an indictment of the education trade unions who have massive resources and could easily establish the true number of fatalities and infections. They choose not to do so as it would upend their collaboration with government in keeping schools either fully open or continuing to admit ever larger groups of children and staff.

The only way to stop the ever wider spread of the virus is to shut down all non-essential workplaces, including schools, accompanied by the financial support necessary to sustain the population until the virus is contained or eradicated.

Educators must build rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the trade unions, as the only basis to ensure safe schools and workplaces. We call on educators to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* if you have news of COVID-19 infections or deaths in your school/workplace. All those looking for a way forward should attend the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee online meeting Saturday, January 23, 2-4 p.m. GMT, to organise the fight for these urgent measures.



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