

Government statistics reveal vast scale of UK school teacher and staff COVID-19 infections

Tania Kent
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UK government statistics on “Covid related reasons” for school absences in the period leading up to the Christmas holidays have revealed the widespread exposure of school staff to COVID-19.

They are a devastating indictment of the Conservative government’s policy of forcing schools to stay open, supported by the Labour Party and the trade unions.

The school workforce data for state schools in the week ending December 18 shows:

- Just over 4,000 (0.9 percent) of teachers and school leaders were off work with a confirmed case of coronavirus, and around 3,000 (1.1 percent) of teaching assistants and other staff.

- Around 10,000 (2.1 percent) of teachers and school leaders were self-isolating due to contact with a case of coronavirus inside school, and more than 8,000 (3.1 percent) of teaching assistants and other staff.

- Around 1,800 (0.4 percent) of teachers and school leaders were off work with a suspected case of coronavirus, and just over 1,000 (0.4 percent) of teaching assistants and other staff.

- Just under 5,000 (1.1 percent) of teachers and school leaders were self-isolating due to potential contact with a case of coronavirus outside the school, and around 3,700 (1.4 percent) of teaching assistants and other staff.

- Up to 20,000 teachers and teaching assistants were self-isolating on a single day, December 16.

These figures confirm the findings of a survey carried out by the NASUWT teachers’ union for the week ending October 19 to the week ending November 20. Using school staff data provided by three local authorities, Leeds, Birmingham and Greenwich, the NASUWT found COVID rate among school staff were significantly higher than the rate for the general area—up to four times as high in Leeds.

The Conservative government claimed for months that “schools are the safest place for children to be” and that teachers were at no more risk of catching COVID than any other group. They resorted to manipulating statistics to play down these risks as propaganda in the service of their “herd

immunity” policy, designed to protect the wealth of the rich at the expense of lives and wellbeing of educators and other workers.

Surging infections in schools prior to Christmas were an open secret. The period covered by the statistics was one of mounting opposition among teachers to the keeping open of schools, in response to a massive increase of infections amongst children aged 2-17, who constituted over 50 percent of new infection at that time.

The government was aware of the existence of a new, far more infectious, variant of the COVID virus, and that 75 percent of infections among children involved this new variant. It concealed this information and threatened legal action against Greenwich and other London local authorities for announcing an early closure of schools on December 14.

As the virus was allowed to run out of control, with over 60,000 daily infections and sharply rising numbers of deaths following the Christmas break, Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared that secondary and primary schools in the south would be closed for two weeks at the start of term in the New Year. Educators in their tens of thousands across the rest of the country refused to return to work on safety grounds and the government was forced to announce the closure of all schools in a “national lockdown” on January 4. Johnson had to admit that schools are “a vector for the virus”.

Johnson and the Tories were only able to peddle their lies about schools being safe thanks to the education unions who allowed them to be reopened in September. Feeling exposed by the government’s statistics, the National Education Union (NEU), the largest teaching union, now demands the government “explain” its actions!

Reviewing the figures, the NEU notes that teachers have been almost twice as likely to catch COVID-19 as the wider population in recent months. The NEU’s own analysis of the statistics shows that teachers in primary and secondary schools have been 1.9 times more likely to be infected with coronavirus—and special school staff twice as likely—as the general population.

The figures for support and other school staff with COVID-19 are higher, according to the NEU. COVID rates among other school support staff are estimated to be three times higher in primary schools and almost seven times higher in special schools.

The NEU ask of the government, “Why have the ministers repeatedly told school staff and the public that there was no reason for concern when these figures indicate that there should have been real concern about the much higher Covid infection rates of teachers and other school staff?”

“Why did ministers deny clinically extremely vulnerable staff the right to work from home?”

“Why has it taken ministers so long to release this data?”

“What mitigating measures will ministers now propose?”

The most important question is why did the NEU and other teaching unions allow this to happen? As NEU joint general secretary Kevin Courtney admitted in a meeting earlier this month, “My union supported the opening of schools in September”. This was, he claimed, aimed at “pressing the government to put in place measures to make schools safe, more COVID secure.”

In fact, the union abandoned their safety demands for the reopening of schools in September when not one of those demands had been met. They were at one with Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer who insisted in August that schools must reopen, “No ifs, no buts, no equivocation.”

The NEU then blocked and opposed calls for strike action to close schools in December

It continues its rotten collusion with the Tories. Special schools and nurseries have been excluded from the national lockdown. Knowing that special school staff are at seven times greater risk, the NEU have not called for their immediate closure, with all appropriate safeguards and support put in place for children and their families.

Millions of parents are being forced to go to work and to send their children into unsafe classrooms. Department for Education figures show that 21 percent of primary pupils were taught in the classroom as of January 13, and 5 percent of secondary school students. These are roughly five times the figures seen in the first lockdown, when 4 percent of primary school and 1 percent of secondary school children were in classrooms. These average figures conceal an extremely uneven national picture, with poorer areas having significantly higher percentages in attendance.

More staff are required to go into school, including half of primary school teachers. Across all school settings, 39 percent of teachers and school leaders are still going into work, compared to 13 percent last April, according to the latest official DoE workforce census.

Around 51 percent of “teaching assistants and other staff” were working onsite in open settings last week, including 57

percent in primary schools and 36 percent in secondary schools.

The essential position of the NEU on school reopenings was made clear as far back as May by Courtney’s co-general secretary, Mary Bousted, who tweeted asking Education Secretary Gavin Williamson “to set up a working party to really examine the practicalities of wider school opening when it is safe to do so. Reopening schools is a question of logistics, not of risks.”

The NEU is run by a privileged bureaucracy that defend their own social interests and maintain friendly relations with management, employers and government. They will do nothing in opposition to the priorities of the capitalist class and act only to dissipate, disorient and block the development of the opposition by educators to working in a proven unsafe environment.

To defend themselves, workers must organise independent action based on a new political perspective. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was established last September to take up this fight.

The committee demands an immediate closure of schools, except to the small number of children of essential workers, until the virus is under control. When schools can be safely reopened must be decided by school staff, based on the scientific advice of experts independent from the government. To make this possible, a fully funded programme of support must be made available to all children and families required to stay at home.

We call on educators, parents and students who agree with this programme and want to fight for it to sign up to the Educators Newsletter and participate in today’s online meeting at 2pm.



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