

# As schools reopen, UK educators among top groups at risk of catching COVID-19

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A report by the UK's Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that educators are among the occupation groups most likely to contract COVID-19.

The "Coronavirus (Covid-19) Infection Survey: characteristics of people testing positive for Covid-19 in England, 22 February 2021" analysed data between September 1, 2020 and January 2021, putting education workers "at the upper end of the continuum."

The likelihood of all occupations testing positive for the virus fell between the range of 2.1 percent to 4.8 percent. Educational professionals were in the "higher" risk group, which included "caring personal service occupations, protective service occupations, secretarial and related occupations and other managers and proprietors."

Educators came fourth out of 25 occupations, with a 4.4 percent likelihood of catching the virus. The differences between those at the top of the continuum and those at the lower end at less risk were found to be "statistically significantly different."

The government has attempted to conceal the number of infections and fatalities in schools and other workplaces, but an analysis of official figures reveals that at least 570 education workers' lives have already been taken by Covid.

The latest ONS report was published February 22, the day after Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the Conservative government's roadmap for the "irreversible" lifting of the "last lockdown." Publicly embracing the homicidal policy of herd immunity that has led to at least 135,000 fatalities, Johnson declared that the population must "accept that there will be more infections, more hospitalizations and ... more deaths."

The economy will fully reopen by June 21, before the virus can be suppressed, with new more deadly strains emerging, and the vaccination rollout only in its early stages. Schools and colleges reopening are pivotal to these plans, forcing millions of pupils and workers, including

teachers, support staff, caterers and caretakers into a highly dangerous environment. Schools are to reopen from March 8 in England and the phased reopening of schools began a week ago in Scotland and Wales.

The narrative spun by politicians and the media is that attempts to suppress the virus should be measured against the harm this does to "the economy," i.e., the profits of the corporations. The ruling elite insists that the working class must accept the new normal and send their children to school so they can go to work and risk death.

Discussions are open about what is an "acceptable" level of death. Former head of Ofsted (schools inspectorate) Sir Michael Wilshaw declared on the BBC's *Newsnight* that teachers should show "a similar commitment" as medical professionals, some of whom "have sacrificed their lives."

The Department for Education (DfE) dismissed the ONS findings on the dangers facing educators with a statement by Professor Viv Bennett, chief nurse and director of maternity and early years at Public Health England. She wrote, "It is vital for children's wellbeing that we get schools open again."

"Staff, parents and pupils can feel reassured by scientific evidence that shows transmission in schools is low and that children are not drivers of infection in schools or the wider community."

"The system of controls and the introduction of rapid testing programmes in place in schools offer further reassurance in the measures taken to maximise the safety of the school environment."

The clam that opening schools at the height of a deadly pandemic is out of concern for children's wellbeing is absurd. Education and children's services have been cut to the bone since the 2008 banking crisis. Progressive child-centred initiatives introduced in the 1960's have long been replaced with rigorous targets and testing, to the detriment of children's mental health.

The assertion that transmission from schools to the community is low is refuted by the government's own Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE). The *TES*, (formerly, *Times Educational Supplement*) reported minutes from a SAGE meeting that estimated "the opening of primary and secondary schools is likely to increase effective *R* [Reproduction of the virus] by a factor of 1.1 to 1.5 (10 percent to 50 percent)."

Numerous scientific studies have proved that children do catch, transmit and in some tragic cases become seriously ill with the virus, and die. Recent data from Quebec, Canada suggests children age nine or younger have the highest susceptibility to catching the B.1.1.7 (UK) variant of Covid-19.

Rapid testing offers no reassurance that levels of infection can be monitored. Lateral flow tests were previously abandoned, due to impracticalities and because they are not accurate.

The measures referred to by Bennett are an even more relaxed version of the ineffectual guidelines produced by the DfE when schools opened in September. Last week, the government reversed its guidelines and said that testing and wearing masks would not be compulsory in schools.

Previous guidance that two or more confirmed Covid cases in 10 days constitutes an "outbreak" has been relaxed to 14 days. *SchoolsWeek* reported the government "anticipates that it will no longer be necessary to advise shielding [for Clinically Extremely Vulnerable pupils and staff] beyond the end of March 2021."

Last July 15, the infection rate was seven per 100,000 according to SAGE member Karl Friston of the University College London. He estimates that by March 8 it will be 42 per 100,000. Within two months after the September reopening there were 8,000 outbreaks in schools, so far worse can be anticipated.

Reopening schools is being backed to the hilt by the opposition Labour Party and the education unions. Throughout the pandemic, they have supported the government in suppressing educators acting alongside parents to maintain lockdown until the virus is suppressed.

Dr Mary Bousted, joint general secretary of the National Education Union (NEU), responded to the latest ONS report by reiterating the union's support for the government's roadmap, saying only that it must be done safely, according to the NEU's Education Recovery plan. But schools cannot be made safe because social distancing is impossible in a school setting.

To defuse the growing opposition of educators, the NEU has organised another zoom meeting of its members on March 1, advertised to discuss how to #MakeschoolsSafe. The meeting is being held at 5 p.m. Monday, a week *after* many education staff nationally were sent back into classrooms.

Teachers took to Twitter to express their disgust at the union. One tweet declared, "I think your only choice is to ballot teachers and call a strike—parents would support you."

Another stated, "You can't send your members back to workplaces that are not safe. You're playing fast and loose with their lives, their families, and children and their families' lives. You are their protection. You've not done a great job so far."

Other comments included, "You must take a stand. Lives really do depend on it"; "What on earth do we pay you for? If you don't take action during a global pandemic ... then when will you?"

One teacher wrote, "It's not a road map; It's a shameful experiment; New Variant v. human lives; It starts on March 8; It lasts 5 weeks. Then they count the dead teachers. And call them statistics."

School staff, pupils and their families face great danger. Longer school days and shorter holidays, to be implemented as part of the government's catch-up program for lost learning during lockdown, not only means the intensified exploitation of an already exhausted section of the working class. Under such conditions the virus will have greater opportunity to spread.

The pandemic can be stopped, but this requires the working class intervening independently of Labour and the trade unions. Educators, parents and students are invited to attend the next online meeting Saturday, March 6 of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to organise opposition to the unsafe reopening of schools and to demand comprehensive public health measures to combat the pandemic, including financial help for non-essential workers and small businesses. To participate in the meeting and to receive our regular newsletter register [here](https://www.wsws.org/contact).



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