

COVID-19 infections shoot up in reopened UK schools

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In the few weeks since the reopening of schools across the UK (in Scotland on February 22; in Wales on March 15; in England between March 8 and March 15) infections of COVID-19 have grown exponentially among pupils.

Mask wearing and testing have not been made mandatory in schools, even as data proves that pupils and education staff have an elevated risk from contracting COVID-19.

Public Health England figures for the week to March 21 show that 43 percent of all new coronavirus cluster outbreaks occurred in Educational Settings. Of the 233 outbreaks, 101 were in Education Settings.

On March 23, *TES* (formerly, *Times Educational Supplement*) reported that the number of pupils absent for COVID-related reasons had doubled in the second week since schools reopened.

Citing recent data published by the Department for Education (DfE), the journal said that around 2 percent of state school pupils were absent on March 18 (up from 1 percent on March 11) due to having contracted or come into contact with the virus, or because their school was closed as a consequence of COVID-19.

TES explained that this “includes a near fourfold rise in the number of pupils self-isolating after potential contact with the virus in school” —from 33,000 on March 11 to 127,000 on March 18. One in 10 secondary school pupils were absent on March 18.

The DfE figures revealed that on March 18 there were:

- 7,000 pupils with a confirmed case of COVID-19
- 21,000 pupils with a suspected case of the virus
- 127,000 pupils self-isolating due to potential contact with a case of the virus from inside the educational setting
- 42,000 pupils self-isolating due to potential contact with a case of the virus from outside the educational setting
- 4,000 pupils unable to attend because their school was closed due to Covid-related reasons

The following is a snapshot—mainly from local press accounts—of the initial impact of growing infections after just a few weeks of in-person schooling across Britain.

On March 19, the *Daily Mirror* reported that 137 areas in

England have seen a rise in COVID-19 infections since schools reopened, up to March 15, according to government data.

According to the *Manchester Evening News* on March 22, there had been confirmed cases of the virus at 74 schools in the Greater Manchester area since they fully reopened. The newspaper noted, “However, these are only the ones the *Manchester Evening News* has been alerted to by parents, so the true figure is likely to be even higher.”

Hundreds of pupils were sent home this week at schools across Yorkshire, including in Keighley, Huddersfield, Leeds, Wakefield and Sheffield. Ecclesall Primary school in Sheffield sent home 100 pupils to self-isolate. Another Sheffield school, Valley Park Community Nursery and Primary School, closed after a number of positive cases as a “precautionary measure”, following advice from Public Health England. Valley Park was one of the schools used in the national media as part of its “schools are safe to open” propaganda on March 8.

The BBC reported March 18 that Bricknell Primary School, in Hull—a previous epicentre of the virus—closed for two days following “several” positive coronavirus test results. Acting headteacher Nicola Waites sent a letter to parents informing them that the school was also awaiting the results of further tests. The 630-pupil school was to be deep-cleaned on Thursday and Friday ahead of reopening the following Monday.

Hull City Council, reported the BBC, said that a third of schools in the city had closed some educational “bubbles”.

The day before, March 17, the BBC had reported on the closure of Henley-in-Arden secondary school in Warwickshire due to staff and pupils testing positive. Martin Murphy, the CEO of the Arden Multi-Academy Trust, said there were only 268 of 650 pupils present on the day the decision to close the school was made.

The *Lowestoft Journal* reported March 19 that Phoenix St Peter Academy in Lowestoft postponed its reopening until after Easter due to infections in the school and the local community. A spokesperson said that cases had affected the

school's staffing capacity.

The same day, the *Hampshire Chronicle* reported that Westgate Secondary in Fulflood, Winchester, and St John the Baptist Primary in Waltham Chase, had been added to the Hampshire County Council list of affected schools, joining Kings' Secondary in Winchester and Micheldever Primary, since they reopened.

Although much of the sporadic press coverage has publicised infections among secondary-age pupils—due in large part to the fact that many of them are undertaking voluntary twice weekly lateral flow tests (which only pick up around 60 percent of positive cases, and in some instances even fewer)—there have been reported infections among very young children, too.

Wales Online reported March 17 on 21 positive cases of COVID-19 in the previous seven days among the youngest pupils at Pontprennau Primary School, Cardiff. Three members of staff and 80 pupils from reception and nursery years were told by Public Health Wales (PHW) to self-isolate for 10 days after they were identified as close contacts of confirmed COVID-19 cases.

Significantly, as the 21 cases at the school were all in the same two “contact bubble groups,” the rest of the school remained open.

In total 9,634 cases have been reported by Welsh schools since September, including 4,300 staff. The total pupil population of Wales is just 377,000.

The Johnson government is stopping at nothing to ensure that pupils remain in classrooms in order that their parents are able to go to work and churn out profits for the corporations.

This week, a trial at an initial 10 schools was rolled out under which pupils who are classed as close contacts of a positive case are kept in school. A full trial will see around 200 schools and colleges participating after the Easter holidays.

In order to participate, pupils and their families have to agree to be tested for COVID daily for seven consecutive school days. One of the schools which has volunteered to be part of the trial is Westhoughton High in Bolton. The *Manchester Evening News* reported that “Thirty-eight students who would have been sent home last week, after two positive cases in Year 7, have remained in school for all their lessons after their parents consented to them doing the daily tests instead.” The newspaper's comment that “They [pupils] still need to isolate when outside school...” demonstrates how farcical, and dangerous, such a trial is. The tests mainly being taken in schools are the notoriously unreliable Lateral Flow tests. Of the new daily tests over seven days in the trial, only two will be the more reliable laboratory analysed PCR tests.

The reopening of schools and the wider economy last September, following the first national lockdown, resulted in a huge second wave of the virus, which cost over 80,000 lives. By December, school-aged children had the highest rates of infection in the country, alongside young adults.

At the time of the September reopening, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that one in 1,400 people in England had COVID-19. The figure in the most recent data, for the week to March 20, is one in 340. An estimate provided to the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies predicted that even a more gradual reopening plan, and factoring in an effective vaccination programme, could cost another 58,000 lives by June 2022.

Over 146,000 people have already been killed by COVID-19 according to official figures. The only reason this staggering death toll is not higher still is due to the opposition in the working class which forced the ruling class to impose national lockdown measures.

There still exists enormous opposition among educators, parents and workers to the reckless reopening of schools and nonessential workplaces, but this is being suppressed by the education unions and the Labour Party who are collaborating with the Tory government to ensure they remain open. In response to the schools' infection data from the DfE, Geoff Barton, the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders union, said—after ensuring all his members were sent into unsafe workplaces—that it was “inevitable with schools fully open once again that there will be positive cases and close contacts having to self-isolate”.

The UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee urges all teachers, parents and students to join us in the fight to close unsafe schools and education settings until the virus has been suppressed. Sign up here to receive our regular newsletter and attend our upcoming meetings.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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