

UK government relaxes mask wearing in schools as it lifts safety restrictions amid spread of new Covid variant

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UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government, backed by the Labour opposition and trade unions, is proceeding recklessly with its roadmap for reopening the economy. This began almost fully on May 17 and aims to reopen completely on June 21.

This takes place under conditions where infections from the more transmissible B.1.617.2 variant from India is growing exponentially and is expected to soon become the dominant strain.

Among the safety restrictions being lifted, the government announced that teachers and pupils in secondary schools were no longer required to wear face coverings in classrooms. In primary schools, pupils were always exempt. Masks are only recommended in communal areas, excluding classrooms with poor ventilation housing up to 30 children or more.

The government took this decision despite prior knowledge of the spread of the variant in schools, which it attempted to conceal. According to documents leaked to the *Observer*, a Public Health England (PHE) report May 13 omitted vital data linking 164 cases to schools.

Mask wearing was the main, albeit limited, protection afforded to educators and pupils when schools reopened early March.

The virus is now spreading in schools and communities in all parts of the UK. Universities returned to face-to-face teaching May 17, exacerbating transmission after tens of thousands travelled across the country from home to campus.

The Wilsthorpe Academy School in Long Eaton, with 950 pupils, closed May 4 after confirming 100 Covid cases. Cases in the surrounding area of Erewash soared following the outbreak—the infection rate rose to 185.5 per 100,000 in seven days to May 6, indicating how quickly the disease can take hold. More than 150 cases were

linked to the school. Seventeen cases were found in nearby schools.

Bolton's Assistant Director of Public Health, Lynn Donkin, said, 'Initially we did see some cases linked to international travel, but we've now got a picture of widespread community transmission...'

Several schools in Bolton were forced to send classes home. Positive cases were confirmed at St Joseph's RC High school and Lostock Primary School. Tonge Moor Primary Academy sent its Year One class home after finding a positive case. On Friday, each pupil at Bishop Bridgeman CE Primary School went home with a PCR test kit for all the family. Bolton has introduced voluntary surge testing and the use of facemasks will continue in the town and in nearby Bury schools.

In response to the Bolton outbreak, someone tweeted angrily, “#COVIDEmergency2021. The virus presents exponential growth, especially amongst children. Vaccination and fully supported isolation is a vital part of suppression. So why not vaccinate children? And why not close Bolton Schools?”

PHE recently informed Court Moor secondary school in Hampshire of several cases of the Indian variant at the school, incurring self-isolation and further testing.

Schools are thought to be the source of an outbreak in Ashfield in Nottinghamshire, according to the city council, where coronavirus cases trebled last week. While the Indian variant was not found in Ashfield, in the large city of Nottingham it accounts for more than half new cases.

Pupils at Nicholas Hawksmoor primary school in Towcester, Northamptonshire, along with parents, household contacts and childcare “bubbles” were tested after six cases were confirmed. Mask wearing was resurrected at Wrenn school, in the same county, after an

outbreak.

Runshaw College in Leyland closed for 10 days to contain an outbreak after more than 30 on campus tested positive. PHE genetic testing confirmed some of the cases were the B.1.617.2 variant.

Year groups in three schools in Wakefield closed May 15 due to Covid-19. Southdale CE [Church of England] junior school sent home Year 5 children for 11 days, Year 4 was closed at Middletown Primary Academy, and the nursery at Alverthorpe CE Primary Academy partially shut.

At 10 schools across Fife in Scotland, some pupils self-isolated after covid cases were confirmed. Parents of children at Dingwell Primary School in Ross-shire were informed after a pupil tested positive so a class was sent home for 10 days.

Kevin Courtney, joint general secretary of the National Education Union (NEU), confined his criticism of the government's lifting of safety measures to the use of face masks. The NEU played a crucial role in suppressing opposition to the unsafe reopening of schools.

'It is disappointing that Boris Johnson has ignored the advice of SAGE's [Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies] modellers to keep the use of face masks in the classroom, as well as communal areas in secondary schools and colleges,' he said.

Dr Patrick Roach, general secretary of the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers gave carte blanche to the government's measures, stating, "School and college employers are responsible for the safety of staff and pupils... including reviewing their existing risk assessments..."

Union representatives who attempt risk assessments face victimisation, as happened in many schools, and can expect no back-up from the unions. Unvaccinated staff who are vulnerable or pregnant work without adequate PPE in contact with potentially infectious children.

Educators and parents are turning to social media to voice opposition to government policy. One tweet on SafeEdForAll reads, "It is beyond madness to stop wearing masks in school. #WilfulNegligence." Another, "Are they seriously considering continuing while B.1.617.2 begins circulating whilst also removing masks?"

A further tweet reads, "a school is a crowded indoor space where households mix—ventilation-masks. Both necessary to mitigate risk of transmission since social distancing isn't possible and children aren't vaccinated."

Supporters of the UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety committee spoke to WSWs reporters about the

irresponsible lifting of safety measures. Supply teacher Brian said, "As a parent of school aged children, I am horrified watching the callous relaxing of measures against the transmission of the virus within schools. We're being told by the government that everything is going back to normal.

"Children, unvaccinated are forced into cramped classrooms where social distancing is impossible and encouraged to do away with their masks. I've read about some students being told they will not be allowed to wear masks even if they are vulnerable to the effects of contracting Covid-19.

"We know from the last wave that schools were one of the main environments where transmission of the virus took place, but the government failed to acknowledge this in any meaningful way, by vaccinating teaching staff. All of this, and the emergence of the 'Indian variant' has left school employees and pupils extremely vulnerable."

Learning support assistant Joe was adamant "the government should maintain as many restrictions as possible until it's proven that vaccines are effective [in suppressing transmission]. They've never stepped away from herd immunity. They have an ideological target, and they are putting that ahead of critical data. It's as if the government wants the virus to spread around in another wave."

Yorkshire parent Lucy added, "I would like to see masks in primary. My son aged 7 is the only child wearing one and has no issue with it, he understands that he is helping to protect others."

According to a US study by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in elementary schools in Georgia November-December 2020, "Covid incidence was 37% lower in schools that required teachers and staff members to use masks and 39% lower in schools that improved ventilation."

The Socialist Equality Party calls on educators and parents to join the Educator's Rank-and-File Safety Committee as part of a united struggle for safety in schools with the defence of jobs, pay and conditions in all sectors.



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