

Hundreds of coronavirus outbreaks in schools as new variant spreads across UK

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Schools throughout Britain are reporting cases of Covid-19. This accelerated from May 17, when Boris Johnson's Conservative government lifted most restrictions as part of stage three of its roadmap to reopen the economy completely next month.

The number of outbreaks is increasing daily, despite the rollout of the vaccination programme. Most worrying is the fact that the more transmissible B.1.617.2 variant first identified in India has become the dominant strain.

Department of Education figures show school attendance figures in England are falling, associated with the spread of the virus. On May 20, 91 percent of state school pupils were in class compared to 92 percent on May 12. That week, 87 percent of pupils were in secondary schools, a fall from 89 percent the previous week. In primary schools, attendance fell from 95 percent on May 12 to 94 percent.

On May 20, 82,000 pupils were sent home after contact with a coronavirus case compared to 65,000 the previous week.

Falling attendance in schools follows the government's decision to lift the requirement to wear face coverings—the main protection afforded to educators and pupils since schools reopened early March. The government took this decision despite prior knowledge that the new variant was spreading in schools.

Previously, teachers and pupils in secondary schools were required to wear masks in classrooms. In primary schools, mask wearing was optional but not recommended for pupils. Mask wearing is now limited to communal areas excluding classrooms.

Eight hotspots have been identified across the UK: North Tyneside, Bolton in Greater Manchester and Blackburn and Burnley in the north west of England, Kirklees in West Yorkshire, Leicester in the East Midlands, Bedford in south England and Hounslow in London. Outbreaks in schools, however, are not confined to these areas, suggesting that the new variant is endemic across the UK and out of control.

According to the parent-led advocacy group SafeEdForAll, between March 8 and May 24, Greater Manchester had 104

outbreaks in primary and secondary schools, the highest in the UK. Hampshire followed with 94. The outbreaks were slightly higher in primary than secondary schools.

In Bolton, forced to introduce surge testing and mask wearing, case rates in five to nine and 10 to 14 year-olds made up a third of new infections in the area in the week ending May 14.

This is a reversal of the trend as the pandemic began, when most cases were found in the above 80 age group. The B.1.617.2 variant is affecting younger people, underlining the criminal complacency of the government which insisted children were at low risk of catching, spreading and becoming seriously ill with the virus.

Bolton school King's Leadership Academy sent 200 pupils home until after half term June 4 and years 10 and 11 at Little Lever School are remote learning. Smithills School partially closed Year nine and fully closed Year seven.

In nearby Whitefield, Bury Phillips High sent 40 Year 11 pupils home. Several schools in Wigan were also affected. Also in the region, Year 9 and Year 10 students from Newman RC College in Oldham are remote learning after a number of positive cases.

Another Lancashire school closed its gates until June 7 after pupils tested positive. Cases at Haslingden High School and Sixth Form were identified in all classes, a surge from one the week previous.

On the Lancashire coast Lytham St Annes High School moved students in years 7, 8, 9 and 10 to remote learning for the three days before the half term May 28.

In Teesside in the northeast, the King's Academy in Coulby Newham shut after identifying several coronavirus cases across different year groups. Teachers and children from years one, two, three, four and six in Whale Hill Primary School were sent home after several teachers tested positive.

Schools in Scotland have also had outbreaks. Edinburgh's Holyrood RC High School recently reported a positive case. Half the classes at Davidson's Mains Primary School Edinburgh were sent home, and 17 teachers were self-

isolating until the end of May. In Rutherglen Lanarkshire, a positive case was identified at Trinity High, though the school remains open. Previously 10 schools across Fife, Scotland reported positive cases, after which several pupils were sent home.

Children and staff in two bubbles at St Chad's Primary and Highfields Primary in Lichfield, Staffordshire were offered tests after the new variant was found.

Outbreaks are not confined to the cities. Nine students at Malvern College, a private boarding school in rural Worcestershire, had to isolate in a spare boarding house following an outbreak.

Hampshire County Council reported recent cases in the Costello, Castle Hill and Aldworth schools, forcing bubbles to be sent home.

Bedford Academy switched to remote learning on May 24, after a local surge in cases associated with Indian variants. These included seven cases of variant B.1.617.2 discovered in Bedford schools. With the fourth highest rate in England, the borough council introduced surge testing in four areas.

In Gloucestershire, southwest England, Pillowell Community Primary School sent a bubble home. Finlay Community School in Gloucester sent its reception class home because of an outbreak. Abbeymead Primary School in Gloucester closed to the end of May.

After confirming positive cases in Year 11, Thorpe St Andrew Secondary School in Norwich, southeast England sent pupils home for online learning.

Schools in Wales are reporting cases. Millbank Primary in Cardiff closed May 19 until further notice after 23 staff and five pupils tested positive. At West Park Primary School, Porthcawl, 25 pupils tested positive for coronavirus and 219 other pupils and 12 staff members went home to self-isolate. Classes affected were Year 1, nursery, reception, and years 2 and 3.

The response of the education unions is limited to demanding the government publish data about the spread of the new variant—bolstering the illusion that schools can open safely during the pandemic. The unions have done everything to stymie opposition by parents and educators demanding school closures until the virus is suppressed.

Paul Whiteman, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), said, “The government must be proactive to ensure that transmission in schools, particularly in relation to the new variant, is not allowed to proceed unchecked.”

Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders said, “It is essential that there is full transparency about the impact of the new variant in schools and colleges so that the level of risk is clear and any necessary protective measures can be taken.”

Jon Richards, head of education at the largest public sector union Unison said, “The Government should release the data and keep schools safe. While there are any concerns about safety, face coverings must return.”

At the beginning of the year, the National Education Union released its Education Recovery Plan aimed at keeping schools open. From last summer, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer backed the government in insisting that schools reopen, “no ifs, no buts, no exceptions”.

A paper in the *Lancet* medical journal published May 18 provides further proof that schools are among the main vectors along with workplaces for the spread of the virus. The *Lancet* concluded, “The full reopening of schools in September 2020 was associated with an increase in COVID-19 cases and outbreaks in educational settings across England.”

The data was compiled from an online questionnaire conducted November 2020 by schools, which reported an outbreak (more than two laboratory-confirmed cases within 14 days) to Public Health England. The school outbreaks in the first half of the autumn term, affecting two percent of primary and 10 percent of secondary schools, represented “32% of all outbreaks reported to PHE across all settings (care homes, hospital, prisons, workplaces, food outlets and other).”

The Socialist Equality Party calls on educators and parents to join the Educator's Rank-and-File Safety Committee to take forward the fight to ensure safe workplaces, including the closure of education settings and the provision of billions of pounds for the resources required for remote learning. This struggle can only be successful if it is led independently of the trade unions and as part of a united struggle with workers in all sectors for a socialist response to the pandemic against capitalism's subordination of lives to profit.



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