

UK Delta variant surges with cases rising fastest among schoolchildren

Margot Miller
17 June 2021

Governments around the world are using the far from complete vaccination programmes as justification for letting coronavirus rip through their populations.

As well as putting at risk the huge numbers of people still unvaccinated, and those for whom the vaccine has not produced a robust response, this policy is submitting millions of children to a programme of unmitigated herd immunity.

COVID-19 infection can have serious consequences for young people. It has resulted in thousands of children's deaths in countries like Brazil. Just yesterday in India, three children had eyes removed after developing the Black Fungus infection having fallen ill with coronavirus. Around 8 percent of children infected in the UK go on to develop long-COVID symptoms. Much remains unknown about the longer-term consequences of COVID-19 in children—a small number of studies have drawn a link between the virus and the development of diabetic conditions.

Moreover, allowing the virus to circulate in any significant section of the population gives it an opportunity to develop new variants which threaten the whole vaccination programme.

The speed with which coronavirus spreads through the young population when public health restrictions are withdrawn is being demonstrated in the UK. COVID-19 infections, driven by the more transmissible and deadly Delta variant, are rising exponentially in Britain, with over 11,000 cases reported on Thursday.

Ten days ago, Health Secretary Matt Hancock admitted that a “huge proportion of the latest cases are in children”. Infections in schools have risen even more since. The latest Office for National Statistics data show the highest infection rates are in secondary schools. Pupils in years 7 to 11 had the highest rate of any age group, with one case in every 210 on June 2.

Thursday's REACT-1 study from Imperial College London indicated that the prevalence of COVID-19 is highest among those aged five to 12, as well as younger adults aged 18 to 24.

How dangerous the new variant may prove to be for children is clear in the number of hospitalisations. Ten children—from babies up to age nine—were admitted to hospital in Scotland during the last week of May alone.

Instead of closing schools immediately and returning to remote learning until the virus is suppressed, the Department

for Education (DfE) emailed school leaders to “encourage staff, and students... to continue to test twice weekly”, stating that “student bubbles... should stay in place.”

On May 27, the DfE reported 4,000 COVID-19 cases in children. The estimated absence rate in England's state schools was 1.8 per cent—the highest since summer term began. The number of children self-isolating surged from 60,000 to 90,000 in a week. This week, Public Health England data (PHE) confirmed 149 school outbreaks have been linked to the Delta variant since April 26—with 136 of them coming in the four weeks up to 6 June.

Up to the start of half-term, the proportion of pupils in England absent from school because of COVID-19 nearly doubled from 1 to 1.8 percent. According to official data, this amounted to more than 140,000 pupils.

A June 11 article by five experts in the *BMJ*, (formerly, *British Medical Journal*) condemned the government for leaving “children, staff, and communities exposed to the rapid spread of a new and more transmissible variant, and at risk of long covid.” Absent in schools were “basic mitigations of face coverings, space, and fresh air.”

Such is the spread since the government almost fully reopened the economy on May 17 that, as the school summer term resumed, many schools reintroduced mask-wearing. This was against government advice, which insisted any mask-wearing could be relaxed in schools and other education settings.

Speaking to Sky News on June 7, Sir David King, chair of Independent SAGE (Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies), and former chief government scientific adviser said mandatory face coverings in schools should be enforced. King questioned whether the government actually believed “in herd immunity amongst school children? Is that why they are saying take masks off, so that the disease spreads rapidly and that they all become immune by having had the disease?”

The government decided to lift mask-wearing despite knowing the Delta variant was spreading in schools. Advocacy group The Citizens and data rights firm AWO have sent a pre-action legal letter to PHE accusing the government body of withholding vital data regarding outbreaks of the variant in schools. A report was due to be published last month.

The fact that COVID-19 is spreading like wildfire through schools is nonetheless impossible to hide.

Last week, 15 schools across all 10 areas of Greater Manchester confirmed cases of the Delta variant. Almost one in three children were absent in Bolton schools in the last week of May due to the variant.

In nearby Liverpool, the Bluecoat school sent 180 pupils home after positive cases were confirmed.

Downend School had to resume remote learning in Gloucestershire after 31 cases were confirmed.

In the London borough of Bromley, health chiefs wrote to parents in Ealing, Hillingdon, Brent, Harrow, and Hounslow advising mask-wearing continue “until further notice”. With 58 confirmed cases, Bromley is the eighth-worst affected borough in London with the new strain.

Bristol, which reported 25 schools with outbreaks of the variant, has also reintroduced face coverings.

In Yorkshire, Sandal Castle Primary School in Wakefield and Outwood Academy Hemsworth reported Delta cases as term began. Tadcaster Grammar school reverted to remote learning after positive cases were identified.

Haslingden High School, in Rossendale, Lancashire had no cases in the run-up to half term. As school resumed on Monday, two students tested positive, by Friday there were 35 and by the weekend, 70.

Students at Wilmington Grammar Schools for Girls and Boys, Kent are being tested after outbreaks at the University of Kent and King’s School, Canterbury.

Hertfordshire County Council issued a Covid warning in the Three Rivers district—with a population of 93,323—as a cluster of coronavirus cases was found May 27-29 in children aged 10 to 14. Children aged five to nine tested positive.

In Watford, Cherry Tree Primary closed before half-term after cases were confirmed.

In Wales, children at Goitre Primary School in Merthyr Tydfil went home for a week after a school visitor tested positive. An outbreak of the Delta variant involving schools was reported in Denbighshire. Basseleg school in Newport sent 300 children home after 100 tested positive.

In Scotland, 316 children in Perth and Kinross self-isolated after pupils tested positive in five schools. St John’s RC Academy reported nine cases between May 26 and June 1. Positive tests were identified in students at Balhousie Primary School, Inch View Primary School, Kinross High School and Perth Grammar School.

Relying on scientifically discredited lateral flow testing in schools to control the spread has utterly failed. The UK’s Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) is expected not to recommend vaccinating almost all under-18s.

The response from the education trade unions to this unfolding disaster is only to call on the government to reintroduce mandatory mask-wearing. Joint NEU general secretary Mary Boustead said lamely, “We advised the

government it was premature to be taking the masks away”.

The NEU has consistently refused to mobilise its membership of 450,000 to keep schools closed during the pandemic. Along with the other education unions, it suppressed opposition by parents and teachers, who wanted face-to-face learning replaced with remote teaching until it was safe to return to the classroom. So opposed is the NEU to closing school sites that the union’s joint leader, Kevin Courtney, tweeted last week that “Outdoor lessons should be encouraged wherever possible.”

General Secretary of school leaders’ union NAHT Paul Whiteman said complacently, “the number of children not attending school due to Covid is low overall” while noting a “distinct rise... in some areas.”

The virus was able to spread and mutate because the Labour Party and unions agreed schools and the economy must reopen. Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham backed the government’s roadmap to reopening the economy. Before Monday’s announcement of a four-week delay in ending all restrictions on social distancing (originally scheduled for June 21), he said, “I want to try and stick to the 21st June ... but it’s got to be done safely.”

Without the introduction of the most stringent public health measures, until the whole population is vaccinated, more cases and deaths will follow.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on educators and parents to join the Educator’s Rank-and-File Safety Committee to take forward the fight for a rational response to the pandemic based on science, including the closure of all educational settings and non-essential workplaces until the virus is properly suppressed—with tens of billions of pounds given over to resourcing remote learning. Such a struggle can be successful only if waged independently of the unions, as part of a united struggle for socialism with workers in all sectors against capitalism’s subordination of lives to profit.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact