

UK educators expose spread of Delta virus, denounce unions for lack of opposition

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The UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee surveyed subscribers to its newsletter on the impact of the Covid pandemic on schools. The committee gathered independent and first-hand accounts of the spread of the new Delta variant.

Every respondent explained that the pandemic is already rife in schools and that the removal of face masks has escalated the risks confronting staff. Many expressed anger and disgust at the lack of opposition by the unions throughout the pandemic and the risks staff and children face as a result.

The Delta variant which was first detected in the UK at the beginning of April is known to spread more rapidly and is more deadly than previous variants. Yet schools were told that from May 17 mask wearing would be dropped. Many other restrictions were lifted on the same day, including the opening of pubs and restaurants.

Schools have become a key vector for the virus once again.

Over 65,000 people have been infected over the past seven days, up by 31 percent on the previous week. Patient admissions have risen 39.6 percent over the past week. Just two weeks ago, Health Secretary Matt Hancock admitted that a “huge proportion of the latest cases are in children”.

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. Last 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.

Respondents to the Educators rank-and-file committee survey were from many parts of the UK.

Deborah from Tyneside explained the horrendous conditions that teachers have been forced to work in over the past year: “I work in a small school, 130 students 11-16 year old moderate learning difficulties. Our first case was a positive parent [at the] end of October-child self-isolated as per regulations. In November our first staff member tested

positive. Within 2 days we had 3 staff confirmed by end of the week 12 positive staff... the school closed to all for 2 weeks. In January I was admitted to hospital and diagnosed with Long Covid. I am still taking daily meds and not back to work full time and don’t expect to be this academic year.”

Since April this year there have been “9 families of students self-isolating and we have had 3 student lateral flow tests show positive. I can’t use a mask full time now and my students are all exempt so very scary for me. I use a mask as much as possible and visor when not able.”

Shelley from Northants said that since April there have been, “Several outbreaks, bubbles closed, or not closed.” There is a lack of safety and protection for educators: “Staff are moved around which spreads Covid from bubble to bubble. I contracted Covid pneumonia from a HLTA [higher level teaching assistant].”

Shelley opposed the removal of masks, saying, “I think that they (the government) are disregarding danger to staff.” The unions were “Useless. They have no power and the government knows it.”

Heather, a secondary teacher from Bolton, said of the recent outbreaks, “All year groups are affected, all except Year 7 have been sent home as whole year group. Year 10 and 11 sent home most often, rarely been in school for more than a few weeks. Most staff have been infected at some point, including myself and I now have long Covid.”

Government measures were “wholly inadequate” and the removal of masks are “ridiculous—especially in areas of concern especially with Indian variant.” The unions took up no defence of staff: “They were ineffective and not willing to fight. I had to fight to keep my job with no practical support from union. I got a formal warning for having Long Covid.”

A teacher from Newcastle wrote that Covid has had “A massive impact on staff workload and wellbeing. My school is in a deprived area with large numbers of EAL [English as an additional language] families. Many had no access to devices or internet. We have had strict health and safety

procedures to minimise the risk of outbreaks spreading in school but children and members of staff have still contracted Covid.”

The school is in “A large Victorian building which does not lend itself to social distancing and does not have enough toilet and hand washing facilities to avoid bubbles overlapping.

“I contracted the virus and am now suffering Long Covid. I have been absent from work for a long period and this has increased my colleagues’ workload and meant the children in my class have not had consistency as different adults have been covering my absence.

“Now, there is huge pressure on teachers to ‘catch children up’. This unhelpful rhetoric of lost learning and catch up should be stopped. Expectations need to be adjusted and the curriculum should have more flexibility to enable the children to move on from their current levels. They have suffered enough through lockdown and for the sake of their mental health should not be pressured to ‘catch up’.

“The government has let schools and staff down. They have not provided guidance in a timely manner and ignored, or blatantly lied about the risk to teachers. There is not enough funding to ensure safety measures could be implemented properly. Not enough funding to allow small class sizes to enable teachers to tailor learning to individual needs.”

Melissa, a science teacher from Wokingham, said in her school, “There was a large outbreak amongst pupils and staff from November to December. Approximately 30 staff and at least 50 pupils that we know of. One staff member sadly passed away from Covid. There were no school closures in this time. Since April, [there were] literally hundreds [of pupils were] out at a time. Many pupils had to isolate multiple times. Some pupils were physically in school for less than half of the autumn term. Many staff had to isolate due to their own symptoms but were rarely ever advised to isolate due to cases in pupils.

“I was identified as a vulnerable member of staff and I had to chase up my risk assessment. Then I was told ‘the guidance has changed and we don't have to give you anything extra’.

“We barely had enough hand sanitizer or wipes to clean things. Staff taught across all year groups. When a student was positive they only isolated the minimum amount of close contacts, not entire bubbles.”

On the removal of masks, Melissa said, “I think it was short sighted. Pupils were already coping well with masks just as the rest of society who wear them all day cope. Cases are beginning to rise and we are seeing pupils isolating again in rising numbers. This will only continue as school pupils aren't able to have vaccinations yet. I don't think the unions

have been strong enough.”

Phillip from High Wycombe commented, “There have been 24 confirmed cases in my school in May 2021. I do not know what was been done about this, apart from sending those children home. I notified my union, the NASUWT [National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers], and they ignored me. They are pathetic!”

Lindsay, a teaching assistant (TA) from Wigan said there “Is constant stress and fear. TAs were taking the brunt as teachers taught from home while we supervised in person. Bubbles were ignored for convenience. There have been 6 confirmed positive cases in May this year and there are multiple children isolating.”

She was scathing of the role of the unions: “Disgusted and let down. They rolled over, played along with the government and took our fees anyway. When staff were begging for help, the NEU [National Education Union] was busy campaigning for nurses and hungry children instead, even asking members for money and ignoring their requests for action.”

Elsbeth, a teacher from Somerset said, “All of Year 10 have had to isolate twice, as have 2 classes from Year 8 since May. Why children are not wearing masks at most schools currently, is beyond me. The unions, she said, were “Non-existent, lots of hot air.”

The education unions have been fully compliant with the “herd immunity” agenda of the Conservative government throughout the Covid pandemic. Refusing to mobilise their members in opposition to unsafe schools and to demand they are closed, under conditions of the massive surge of the Delta variant they have left staff and children totally unprotected.

The Educators Rank-and-file Safety Committee was set up in September 2020 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.

We will be holding an online forum on Saturday July 10 to discuss the dangers confronting educators and the working class as a whole, fighting to build independent action committees in all schools and colleges. Please register here to participate.



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