

Spiralling COVID infections in UK schools: A warning to the world

Liz Smith
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The UK education system is on the verge of collapse as schools break up for the summer term this week. Across the country, in every region, hundreds of thousands of school children and staff have been forced to isolate due to either having made close contact with someone with COVID or testing positive for virus themselves, as the Conservative government's "let it rip" pandemic policy takes effect.

Almost 840,000 children (11.2 percent) in England's state schools were not in class on July 8 because of COVID, according to the latest official figures. This was the highest level since March and a 31 percent increase on the week prior. Of those off school, 39,000 pupils had tested positive and 35,000 had a suspected infection. A further 630,000 were absent for other reasons.

The situation will have worsened dramatically since then. The vast majority of infections are the highly transmissible and more deadly Delta variant, which is overwhelmingly dominant in Britain. Hundreds of schools have been forced to close for the summer early, due to the lack of staff or multiple cases of the virus across several class and year group "bubbles". About 18,000 children were at home because their schools were closed on July 8 and many thousands of parents, alarmed at the rapid rise of infections, have voted with their feet and kept children at home.

This dire situation was worsening even before the July 19 lifting of all containment measures by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government in its cynically named "Freedom Day". The current surge among children will massively contribute to the wave of COVID-19 in the general population in the coming weeks.

Johnson said bluntly earlier this month that the UK "must reconcile [itself] to more deaths" and that

infections could rise to 50,000 a day. That total has already been reached. Health Secretary Sajid Javid, who has now tested positive for the virus, also demanded the population "learn to live with the existence of Covid" and admitted that daily case totals could reach 100,000 before the end of summer. Professor Neil Ferguson, an epidemiologist and modeller for the government, warned at the weekend there is "the potential for the UK to have a very large number of cases, 150,000 to 200,000 a day."

The *Guardian* estimated that there could be two million cases in the remaining six weeks of summer, but this was based on a conservative estimate of an average 35,000 cases a day until July 19 and 60,000 from then until August 16. Hospitalisations from COVID are now at over 4,000, a rise of 26 percent in one week.

The schools most impacted by the surge are in the north of England, where pupils in secondary schools are three times more likely to miss classes as their peers in London. A massive 37 percent of sessions were missed in the week to July 9, with 27 percent missed due to COVID isolation and quarantine. But absences are rising in every region.

Gateshead, in the northeast, has seen its coronavirus infection rate rocket to 1,823 cases in the seven days to July 9, a rate of 902.2 cases per 100,000 people, up from 237.1 per 100,000 the previous week.

Sarah Muckle, director for Public Health in Bradford, West Yorkshire, revealed last week that the average age of people testing positive is 28 and that there had been 126 recent outbreaks of the virus in schools and educational settings.

With the ending of restrictions July 19 and little or no guidance from the Department of Education, school leaders are deciding policy on the fly, creating more

tensions among parents who have to isolate with their children. Teachers and support staff are concerned that they will spend the first weeks of the summer break isolating and caring for loved ones, in a situation where cases and hospital admissions are rising, including for children. The latest statistics show that eight percent of COVID hospital admissions are children and one in every 1000 child COVID cases results in hospitalisation. A quarter of those hospitalised experience Long COVID symptoms for an average of eight and a half months.

Sammie McFarland, from support and advocacy group Long Covid Kids UK, said, “We are sleep walking into a Long Covid Apocalypse where children are being swept aside as acceptable debris in the economic recovery.”

This is herd immunity in practice. Boris Johnson’s government pioneered this genocidal policy which has been embraced by all governments. The warning by the scientists in *The Lancet* of “herd immunity by mass infection” which will “place 48% of the population (children included) who are not yet fully vaccinated, including the clinically vulnerable and the immunosuppressed, at unacceptable risk” is being played out throughout the school sector.

This risk is more than acceptable to the government. One model presented to its Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies (SAGE) in February suggested that continuing COVID-19 transmission until summer 2022 could contribute to more than 35 percent of overall “herd immunity”. Insufficient levels of vaccination in the UK would mean that “herd immunity is not reached without a large resurgence of transmission,” the paper speculated, with the bulk of infections to spread among young people.

The education unions are guilty of allowing this tragedy to unfold. They fully supported the reopening of schools last September, opposed any mobilisation of the widespread opposition to the government’s ending the requirement to wear face masks in schools in May, when the Delta variant was already spreading like wildfire, and otherwise subordinated all health and safety concerns of staff to the government’s agenda of profits over lives.

The National Education Union (NEU) stated this month that Education Secretary Gavin Williamson’s policies of scrapping bubbles and replacing isolation

with regular lateral flow testing in schools would lead to an explosion of the virus, but then only asked rhetorically, “Are there any thresholds on case numbers, or hospitalisation or deaths that mean the DfE would do something different in schools in September?”

The pattern set in the UK is repeated in one country after another. Educators, pupils and their parents are forced into unsafe school environments by governments hellbent on reopening the economy whatever the cost. Safety measures are abandoned to reinforce the claim that everything is getting “back to normal.” Infections, hospitalisations and deaths rise inexorably. The education trade unions collaborate fully in this crime.

Only the working class can call a halt to this ongoing catastrophe. Teachers, lecturers, parents and students in every school, college and university must take up the fight to form rank-and-file safety committees to organise the working class independently of the corporatist unions. They must demand an end to the lifting of public health measures and that schools remain closed until all staff and students can be vaccinated. Wages must be guaranteed for all those affected and proper online learning made available to all, paid for at the expense of the major corporations and banks.

We call upon all educators and other workers to take up this fight. To find out more, please contact the World Socialist Web Site today.



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