

COVID-19 cases soar in Scotland as schools reopen

Margot Miller
30 August 2021

Since the Scottish parliament lifted all Covid restrictions on August 9 and schools reopened on August 16 after the summer break, coronavirus cases are soaring.

On Friday, cases hit a record high of 6,835, a rise from 1,567 or over 300 percent since the beginning of the autumn term. In comparison, daily cases reached a high of 4,234 during the summer wave. This was the third record set for daily cases in a matter of days. On Sunday the record was surpassed again—for the fourth time in six days—as Scotland reported another 7,113 cases.

Half of all new cases are in the under 25 age group, and on Tuesday 34 percent of cases were under 19 years old. Public Health Scotland (PHS) reported a threefold rise in case rates for 16-17-year-olds since August 8, and a fivefold rise for 18-19-year-olds—compared to the national average which doubled. Test positivity rates for children aged 2-17 are at 19.9 percent.

On August 24, 15,000 pupils (14,914) were absent from school due to Covid, with nearly 18 percent (2,496) sick with the virus and 11,976 in self-isolation. Over 1,500 Scottish education staff were also absent due to Covid-19 related reasons. Of these, 266 teachers and 215 school-based staff either had a positive Covid test or symptoms. Two out of every 100 pupils were reported absent from school for Covid-related reasons on August 27 by PHS.

Even before further and higher education campuses reopen in September, educational settings account for one out of six cases overall.

On Monday, 551 people were in hospital and 52 in intensive care, up from 312 people in hospital on August 20 and just 58 on May 4. To August 21, there have been 943 child Covid hospital admissions in Scotland during the pandemic. The total Covid death toll in the country stands at 8,103.

The situation had worsened so much that by last Thursday that the World Health Organisation named five health boards in Scotland—Dumfries and Galloway, Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Lanarkshire, Lothian, and Tayside—in its list of the 20 most severely affected areas in Europe.

In response to this growing catastrophe, Deputy First Minister John Swinney admitted, “Undoubtedly the gathering of people together in schools will have fuelled that [the case rise] to some extent, and you can see that in the proportion of younger people who are testing positive.”

Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said, “That is one of the sharpest rises we have experienced at any point during the pandemic,” describing the numbers as “cause for concern” but making clear the government was not considering even a circuit breaker lockdown. On Sunday, Sturgeon herself was forced into self-isolation after coming into contact with someone with Covid.

Many young people remain unvaccinated. A total of 74 percent of 18-24-year-olds have had at least one dose, of whom only 46 percent are double vaccinated. This compares with 95 percent of over 40s who are fully vaccinated. The figure is 70 percent for those in the 30-39 age range. Only now will 16-17-year-olds be offered a first dose of the Pfizer vaccine.

School children are currently not eligible for vaccination and therefore among the most vulnerable, yet they have been sent unprotected back into the classroom! Schools are a major vector for the spread of the virus and children can suffer devastating health consequences from Covid—including cognitive, respiratory and cardiac damage, Long Covid and, in the most tragic cases, death.

The UK’s Office for National Statistics April report estimated that of children who tested positive, 12.9 percent aged two to 11, and 14.5 percent aged 12 to 16 had symptoms five weeks after they were first infected. In the UK in July, 33,000 children ages 2–16 and 71,000 young people ages 17–24 were suffering Covid symptoms after 12 weeks.

Many schools in Scotland have already been forced to send pupils or classes home.

· Around 60 out of the 203 schools in the Highlands were affected by delta outbreaks. Grantown, Kingussie, Culloden and Fort William’s Lochaber high schools all have a number of year groups self-isolating. Aviemore Primary and

Thurso's Pennyland were partially closed.

- Between schools reopening on August 16 and August 22, NHS Highland reported more than 1,000 new cases.

- Classes were suspended at Crossmichael Primary in the south of Scotland due to eight members of staff self-isolating for four days.

- In Glasgow, a class from St Albert's Primary school was sent home for 14 days following an outbreak. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde announced it was carrying out contact tracing at seven schools.

- At least two high schools in Aberdeen reported Covid cases among senior pupils.

The example of Scotland is an urgent warning of how quickly the virus spreads when restrictions on social distancing are lifted and schools reopen.

The response of the education unions in Scotland to this next deadly stage of the pandemic mirrors that of the unions in the rest of the UK—cowardly capitulation to the Johnson government's policy of "social murder".

The unions play a particularly pernicious role in maintaining the fiction that schools can be made safe with minimal mitigation methods and vaccines alone. In fact, the explosion of cases as soon as restrictions are relaxed shows the claimed mitigation strategy is little more than window dressing for a policy of mass infection.

While vaccines currently significantly reduce the chances of hospitalization, they offer only limited protection against catching and spreading the virus, and this protection declines over time, allowing the virus to continue circulating. While the virus is allowed to continue infecting large numbers of people, it is given the opportunity to develop new, more virulent, vaccine evading strains and variants.

Larry Flanagan, the general secretary of the Educational Institute of Scotland teaching union, commented, "These figures will be a cause for concern for school communities... They underline the need to remain on guard to ensure schools remain COVID conscious and that mitigations are maintained."

Supporting the relaxation of government guidelines on the required response when an outbreak occurs, his only complaint was that "the change in contact tracing arrangements for schools is creating confusion for parents, pupils and staff. We wish to see all pupils identified as close contacts being required to get a clear PCR test before returning to class.

"This removes the 10-day self-isolation requirement but offers a quick reassurance to school communities and will reduce the risk of in-school transmission."

Schools in Scotland will follow revised-down "safety" measures for another six weeks at most, before scrapping them entirely: one-metre social distancing; only children

determined high-risk to isolate for 10 days after close contact with a positive case; mask wearing for secondary pupils in lessons; secondary school staff and pupils to take twice weekly lateral flow tests. SNP Education Secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville said the measures will be dropped earlier if possible.

Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association general secretary Seamus Searson said, "To keep everybody safe we need to make sure that everybody is vaccinated. Ireland are already vaccinating the 12 to 15-year-olds... we need to move on that quickly to keep everybody safe." He called on for the mitigation measures to last beyond six weeks.

No union is advocating action to bring the disastrous spread of infection among children, school workers and the wider community to an end. They are refusing to wage a fight under conditions in which growing numbers of parents are deregistering their children rather than send them into unsafe schools. Last Friday, PHS figures revealed that 399 pupils were not in school last week because their parents "chose to keep them away... contrary to public health guidance".

On August 22, the *World Socialist Web Site* hosted an online discussion with leading scientists, "For a Global Strategy to Stop the Pandemic and Save Lives." The scientists advocated a policy for the eradication of Covid-19, based on a combination of aggressive public health measures, including school closures, and vaccination to eliminate the virus completely.

This programme, requiring a huge and coordinated investment of resources, can only be implemented by a mass movement of the international working class. We call on educators, parents and workers who agree with this strategy to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK), attend its meetings and set up committees in every workplace to organise a fightback against the homicidal herd immunity policies of the Johnson government and its Scottish counterpart.



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