

Millions return to school in the UK as doctors and scientists issue warnings

Thomas Scripps
6 September 2021

Millions of children returned to school in England yesterday for the first full week back after the summer break, amid warnings from scientists over the rapid spread of COVID-19.

The infection rate in the UK among all age groups is currently 26 times higher than it was this time last year, and rising. Over 41,000 people tested positive for the virus yesterday, taking the total for the last week to 263,885 cases, a 12.2 percent increase on the week before. There were 6,573 people admitted to hospital in the last week, a 3.7 percent increase, and 789 deaths, over 110 a day.

Yesterday's case number took the official total in the UK during the pandemic to over 7 million. Case numbers are likely far higher. The ZOE Covid Symptom Study, working with King's College London, reported an estimated 57,322 daily cases last week—a 10 percent increase on the week before.

An estimated 30 percent of these cases were among double-vaccinated people, with lead scientist Professor Tim Spector commenting, “we’ve seen evidence that the protection provided by vaccines is wearing off.” This confirms the findings of a major study by Oxford University last month which found waning levels of vaccine efficacy over time for both the AstraZeneca and Pfizer jabs.

The infection rate among children—with 30 times more cases—is even more elevated compared to last year than it is for the general population. In the week to August 28, there were more than 300 Covid cases per 100,000 among five to 15-year-olds, compared to 10 in 100,000 in the same week in 2020.

These numbers will skyrocket in the next few weeks, as children spend hours a day in schools with no requirements for mask wearing, distancing or contact tracing. The “bubble system”, albeit limited, has been scrapped and no provisions made to improve ventilation. The vast majority of children are still unvaccinated.

Dr David Strain, senior clinical lecturer at the University of Exeter Medical School, told Sky News, “The summer holiday acted exactly as a firebreak would. What we’re now

expecting is the rates to pick up and the R number to jump to about 1.7—basically doubling in case numbers on a weekly basis.”

Professor John Edmunds, a member of the government's scientific advisory group for emergencies (SAGE) cautioned that there was “a long way to go if we allow infection just to run through the population, that’s a lot of children who will be infected and that will be a lot of disruption to schools in the coming months.”

A report published by SAGE's Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling subgroup on August 27 predicted: “Schools will represent a high proportion of remaining susceptible individuals and it is highly likely that exponential increases will be seen in school-attending age groups after schools open.”

Infections have already surged in Scotland, after schools reopened several weeks earlier there and in Northern Ireland. A further 7,065 new coronavirus cases were reported Monday in Scotland. Case rates specifically among the under-15s in Scotland have trebled. In the last week, over 400 pupils at both Larne High School in Northern Ireland and St Ninian's High School in Kirkintilloch, Scotland were reported absent due to Covid.

The rapid spread of infection will expose millions of children to the risk of debilitating Long Covid and severe illness and hospitalisation, with the longer-term health implications still unknown. School workers, even if vaccinated, can still contract the disease with serious consequences and will be exposed to extremely high levels of the virus. These risks are especially grave for the clinically vulnerable.

High infection rates in schools will also contribute to a dangerous worsening of the pandemic in the wider population.

Imperial College London pandemic modeller Professor Neil Ferguson has warned that he expects the return of English schools to lead to a “significant surge”. He added that if daily cases are allowed to climb above 100,000 there would be “significant demands on the health system”.

This would coincide with the extreme pressures placed on the National Health Service (NHS) annually in the colder months, which this year are preceded by a “summer crisis”.

Dr Nick Scriven, former president of the Society for Acute Medicine, explained last week: “I think it is fair to say we are currently facing an unprecedented summer workload that feels more like the worst winter pressures most of us can recall.

“We are seeing vast numbers of patients with non-Covid illness alongside the steady admission rates of those still very poorly with Covid.

“The types of illnesses we are seeing are typical of winter weather as in a lot of respiratory infections, especially in paediatrics, but also a lot of people where the lack of access to primary and secondary care during the last 18 months could now be contributing to them needing hospital admission.”

Current president Dr Susan Crossland added: “This is a deeply concerning time as we are in uncharted territory here with a summer crisis consisting of so many different problems with no end in sight and the daunting prospect of an extremely busy and difficult winter.

“We know many hospitals are at bed occupancy levels well over the safe limit of 85 percent, with some at more than 95 percent, at this point of the year and we know we have worse to come”.

The ambulance service received a record number of calls in July—close to one million—and of callouts for life-threatening conditions—82,000. In August, ambulance trusts in the North East, East, South Central and South West regions of England had to call in support from the Army.

Multiple hospitals in the last two months have been forced to declare “black alerts” due to patient numbers and a shortage of staff and resources, meaning they are “struggling or unable to deliver comprehensive care” and patients’ safety is at risk.

NHS Confederation leader Matthew Taylor described the summer as being like a “mid-winter crisis”, saying “we are running hot and you can’t do that forever.”

The criminally unsafe return to school has been backed by a major government propaganda campaign. Education Secretary Gavin Williamson has pledged to “move heaven and earth to make sure that we aren’t in a position of having to close schools,” insisting “we want to see children back in the classroom; we don’t want to see the same level of disruption [i.e., children exposed to the virus self-isolating].”

On August 26, the BBC reported, “A campaign on radio, social and digital media to reassure parents and pupils it is safe to return to school in England has been launched by the government.” The BBC have lent their own services to this offensive.

Williamson and the Tory government can count on the backing of the Labour Party and the trade unions, both of which support the reopening even as they admit schools will become a “cauldron of Covid,” in the words of shadow schools minister Peter Kyle.

Where the unions criticise the government’s actions, they frequently do so from the Tories’ own perspective of minimising “disruption”, not of protecting workers and children. Geoff Barton, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said late last month that the government’s management of the return to school was “a recipe for chaos, and the government cannot once again allow a situation to develop in which attendance unravels, and children experience yet more disruption.”

At most, the unions call for inadequate mitigation measures such as the reimplementation of masking, but even these are made as lame appeals to the government to act.

National Education Union joint general secretary Kevin Courtney has politely recommended, “Government should support leaders in secondary schools and colleges in weighing up the case for continuing to require staff and students to wear face coverings around the premises—including potentially in classrooms—and on dedicated school transport, particularly in areas with high case rates.” He has asked Williamson to help schools “consider face coverings from day one of term, alongside social distancing where possible, and special consideration for vulnerable staff.”

The only political organisation which represents school workers, parents and students fighting for the elimination of the virus through a combination of school and workplace closures, rigorous testing and tracing and a series of public health measures, as well as vaccination, is the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. We call on all those in education who agree with this programme to contact the Committee today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact