

Schools forced to close across Russia as COVID-19 spreads

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About a week after the start of the school year on September 1, dozens of areas in Russia are reporting the closure of classrooms at all levels of the educational system—from daycare to colleges—due to outbreaks and exposures impacting thousands of children, young people, and educators. Russia's families are now confronting a COVID-19 crisis, with a situation developing akin to that seen in the US over the last several weeks.

In Saratov, 21 schools, 20 kindergartens, three vocational high schools, and several institutes had to send hundreds of students and dozens of faculty into quarantine. In Vologodsky, 27 schools had to shutter 34 classes. In Volgograd, children in 28 classrooms moved to online learning this week. In Altai, where automatic closures are triggered when more than 20 percent of teachers are sick, 20 institutions shut 30 school rooms. Other regions forced to take similar measures include, but are not limited to, Adygea, Chelyabinsk, Kemerov, Yekaterinburg, Perm, Nizhegorodsky, Krasnodar, South Ossetia, Kuzbass, and the country's second-largest metropolitan area, Saint Petersburg.

That city is also now recording 10-15 child hospitalizations a day, two to three times what was witnessed in January, as part of a rapid rise in severely ill patients over the last several days. This comes on top of an already worsening situation for the young. It took Saint Petersburg just three months this past summer to see the same number of hospitalizations in the under-18 population as it did from March to September of last year.

The federal government in Russia does not regularly publish official statistics on coronavirus infections among children, forcing analysts to turn to information released by local health agencies to get a portrait of the situation. The Russian national media barely reports on

the unfolding catastrophe.

Just before schools reopened on September 1, the Russian Health Ministry revealed that half a million school children—out of a total number of almost 7 million official cases—had already been infected with the virus in the previous year and a half. Infections among newly born children have climbed 26 times in comparison to the winter, according to Moscow-based pediatrician Evgeny Timakov. He added that, “if adults fall ill in a family, in 80 to 90 percent of cases the children will fall ill too.”

As of early to mid-August—that is, even before schools opened their doors—the Sakha Republic reported seeing a 30 percent rise in cases among kids, the region of Saratov registered a 57 percent uptick in those under 6 with the virus, and local doctors in Altai, Kamchatka, and Bashkortostan said they were seeing more sick children.

Now, Russia is confronting a new surge bound up with the spread of the Delta variant and the reopening of schools.

In Kazan, in a single day this past week, the city reported 500 cases of children with respiratory infections. In Kuzbass, an increase in child coronavirus cases has tipped the region into the “red zone” and led to an extension of the hours of pediatric clinics and increase in emergency services. This comes on top of a population-wide surge in COVID-19 infections in Russia this summer, which, while declining somewhat, still remains well above previous lows with daily cases averaging around 18,000 over the last week.

While government officials seek to publicly downplay the danger of a “fourth wave,” it is clear that it has already begun, and they were well aware of what would happen as millions of school children streamed back into classrooms. The newspaper *Nezavismaya*

Gazeta reported that the Ministries of Education and Science and Higher Education have been anticipating widespread transitions to online learning as COVID-19 makes its way through the schools.

Experts state that massive investments in air filtration systems are necessary to arrest the progress of the disease, but so far, all that schools have managed to introduce, if anything, are anti-germicidal UV systems, the purchase of which is financed out of local budgets and in some cases, parent committees. These efforts, along with other limited mitigation measures such as masking, social distancing, temperature checks, surface cleaning and, in some schools, vaccine mandates for staff, cannot transform Russia's dilapidated schools into safe spaces.

As government officials and the media have done around the world, Russian leaders and major media outlets have long promoted the view that children tend to not get COVID-19 and, should they be infected, not become severely ill. This is untrue. Pediatricians in Tomsk recently reported that 40 percent of their COVID-19 patients have had to consult a cardiologist, 19 percent an allergy-immune specialist, and 10 percent a rheumatologist after infection. In Altai, the head physician at a children's polyclinic, noted that doctors are having to treat infants who have recovered from COVID-19 for urinary tract complications that are long-term.

Child deaths from coronavirus, data about which the government does not release, will rise in the coming weeks and months, mirroring what is happening in countries like the United States and the UK.

There have been just two COVID-19-related deaths among the under-18 population reported recently in the country, including a two-month-old baby in Tula and a 12-year old in Novosibirsk, although in the latter case the local Ministry of Health insisted that the real cause was an underlying genetic disease.

Daily coronavirus deaths in Russia, which have between 750 and 800 since mid-July, show no signs of abating, despite a small drop in the number of cases. It is also widely known that these numbers are a gross underestimate, as officials routinely attribute COVID-19 deaths to other causes, should a patient have any other co-morbidity. Estimates indicate that the real death toll may be up to five times higher than the officially acknowledged 187,000 deaths. The mortality

rate from COVID-19 has been climbing upward throughout this year, and July has been the deadliest month in the pandemic for Russia so far with over 50,000 deaths from the coronavirus.



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