

UK schools reopening puts lives and health of future generations at risk

Margot Miller
14 September 2021

With schools now open for the autumn term, UK schoolchildren are being placed in grave danger. Since the government reopened the economy and relaxed all restrictions, COVID-19 cases have soared.

Daily UK cases were 29,173 on September 12, with deaths hitting 971 over the previous seven days—up 22.6 percent. Cases rose highest, by 42 percent, among 10–19-year-olds in the week ending September 4, according to Public Health England (PHE).

On Monday, a Downing Street press conference announced that the UK's four Chief Medical Officers are recommending 12-15-year-olds take up the vaccine “to prevent further disruption to education.” Vaccination will not be mandatory and does not apply to the under 12s.

While vaccination usually provides protection against more severe disease, many people who are hospitalised have been vaccinated. Vaccination does not provide 100 percent protection from becoming infected or prevent transmission.

The decision to extend the vaccination programme is not motivated by concern over the welfare of children, or the education of disadvantaged children, but the fear that rising cases will mean parents having to stay at home instead of making profits for the big corporations. Throughout the pandemic, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government has minimised the dangers to children, and denied that schools are major vectors of transmission.

On September 2, PHE released revised guidance for schools, including the abandonment of previous albeit limited mitigation measures like mask wearing and sending bubbles home, declaring, “Whilst the risk of severe illness from COVID-19 infection in children and young people has remained low throughout the pandemic, the vast majority of children and young people who get COVID-19 only have very mild symptoms and some will have no symptoms at all.”

For the Conservative government the lives of the 80 children who died from the virus during the pandemic do not matter, nor the tens of thousands with Long COVID.

The BMJ (formerly, the British Medical Journal)

addressed an open letter to Education Secretary Gavin Williamson dated September 3, castigating the government for “Allowing mass infection of children.”

“Children have suffered significant harms from covid-19,” the letter explained. “In just the past two months there have been over 2,300 hospitalisations of under 18s in England. There are an estimated 34, 000 children living with long covid in the UK already... Up to one in seven of those infected are expected to have persisting symptoms at 12-15 weeks. Long covid can be associated with multisystem disease in some children, including persistent cognitive symptoms.”

When schools reopened in Scotland on August 19, COVID cases surged to the highest level at any time during the pandemic. COVID related absences reached a new high of 38,361 on Tuesday, despite the continuation of mask wearing there.

Dingwell Academy in the Scottish Highlands had to close due to staff self-isolating. Second year pupils at Inverness High School were waiting for Covid test results after an outbreak in class.

In Northern Ireland, hundreds of children were sent home. More than 3,500 people aged five to 19 tested positive in the week to September 7.

Eighteen schools in the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area sought advice from the Education Authority relating to Covid cases. Around 400 pupils from Larne High School stayed home on September 6 after contact with a positive case.

The Northern Ireland Assembly was recalled to debate a motion expressing its “significant concern with increasing reports of pupil absences due to the Covid-19 situation in our schools.” Rather than closing schools to stem transmission, however, Stormont decided on a “more targeted approach to contact tracing” to be done by the Public Health Agency, measures which will facilitate transmission.

In line with the rest of the UK, close contacts are redefined so pupils in the same class as a positive case “will not

routinely be asked to isolate and take a test.” Students identified as close contacts will not have to self-isolate for 10 days, but can return to class if they test negative or have no symptoms on day two of their absence. They must take another coronavirus polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test on day eight.

Given that it can take a week for the virus to incubate, this is madness.

The new PHE guidance states “if you are fully vaccinated or aged under 18 years and six months you will not be required to self-isolate if you are a contact of someone who has tested positive for Covid-19.”

Someone tweeted on SafeEdForAll (Safe Education for All), “My eight-year old’s friend and mum have Covid, sister seems fine so keeps going to school to mix with 500 plus and other families, including six classes at a time in poorly ventilated assembly and lunch halls.”

Another tweet read, “Department for Education’s new pandemic policy means a child’s entire household could have Covid, and they can still attend school—unless a child voluntarily takes a test which shows positive or if they overtly show symptoms. This isn’t ‘minimising disruption in schools’; this is hiding it.”

In England, 59 pupils at the Stamford Endowed Schools, Lincolnshire were isolating from September 9 after testing positive. Positive cases were reported at Shirley Manor Primary Academy in Bradford.

According to data published by SafeEdForAll, there were 62 UK school outbreaks for week ending September 13. This will be an underestimation, as there is no official publication of schools with Covid infections either by the government or the trade unions. The outbreaks are only tracked thanks to parent Daniella Modos-Cutter.

Throughout the pandemic, the education unions promoted the fiction that with mitigation measures alone schools can be made safe.

The National Education Union along with the GMB, Unison and Unite published “Coronavirus: joint union safety checklist for schools” for the autumn term. This leaves it to individual union representatives (reps) to make risk assessments and negotiate limited mitigation measures with management on a school-by-school basis. Reps victimised for fighting for safety measures can expect no help from the unions.

Labour Shadow Education Secretary Kate Green, whose party is fully committed to keeping unsafe schools open, said she couldn’t “understand why the government no longer requires masks to be worn in schools when infection rates are higher than they were when masks were required.” Yet many parents who keep their children off school are bullied by Labour controlled authorities, and either forced to

deregister their children or face fines and imprisonment. Their defiance is an expression of the fact that the working class is not prepared to live with the virus.

On Saturday, Socialist Equality Party members campaigned in central Manchester with the statements, The Eradication of Covid-19 is the only way to stop the pandemic and Oppose the return to Schools: Children and educators’ lives matter.

The statements make clear that it is possible to end the pandemic, but what is required is a mass mobilisation of the working class, independent of the trade unions. This movement must fight for a global strategy involving an array of public health measures including vaccination, strict lockdown of non-essential industries and the closure of schools. The alternative is mass deaths, illness and the possible emergence of variants immune to the current vaccines.

A passer-by commented, “I really agree with what you are doing. It’s got to be based on the data”.

A teacher explained, “It’s all back to normal. They don’t wear masks. Even the test and trace isn’t working. You have to get the consent of parents before you can test and trace. I don’t feel safe as a teacher.”

Biomedical graduate Aisha said of the Johnson government, “We had such a slow response to the whole pandemic. They didn’t do anything until the last minute. That’s what’s happening now. Everyone’s mixing, no masks, everything’s going back to normal, forget living in a pandemic!”

“All the festivals are going ahead, there’s no social distancing, a perfect place [for the virus] to breed. We’ve had so many failed lockdowns. Eradication is the ideal measure.”

Aisha’s sister Laiba, a Year 8 schoolgirl, said she wanted to be vaccinated against Covid: “It would be good. We should be wearing masks, even if we do get vaccinated, especially in schools. We have to wear masks on buses, but not in school where it’s crowded. Good luck!”

To take forward the struggle to end the pandemic based on a scientifically based policy of eradication, join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact