

COVID rips through UK schools as councils and headteachers reintroduce mitigations against government policy

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The first half term of the UK school year has seen schools hit with a mass of COVID infections. Schools returned in August/September with no mitigations in place.

This has allowed the virus to spread with staggering levels of infections in children, the highest in the world alongside the United States. Office for National Statistics (ONS) data published October 29 found that one in 25 primary age children and one in 11 secondary pupils are currently infected. This is an increase in both age groups, with ONS data from October 8 finding that one in 33 primary age children and one in 12 secondary pupils were infected.

On Thursday, a chilling statistic was recorded with the 100th child death from COVID-19 in Britain, with 13 children dying in the seven weeks since schools reopened.

Hundreds of thousands of children have been infected, with the Department of Education reporting that around 252 million school days have been missed nationally in the spring and autumn terms because of COVID-19. This represents 29.4 percent of all school days.

Such is the surge in cases that hundreds of local councils and headteachers have been forced to reintroduce some mitigation measures. Mask wearing, sending home whole year groups, and even organising online study have been implemented in recent weeks. Some schools closed early for half-term where pupils went online due to the virus ripping through the school's population.

The government directive that there must be a "a return to normality in classrooms" has been exposed as a herd immunity agenda. Many educators have reported

that this half term has been the hardest yet. A headteacher of a high school in Wardley, Greater Manchester told the *Guardian*, "People are on their knees... There's never been such a hard half-term as this, during the whole pandemic. Schools have been thrown into this with no measures or restrictions and we've been told to deal with it."

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) conducted a survey of its members in mid-October and found that over a third of headteachers said the impact on "teaching and learning has been severe". There was scathing criticism of the government's vaccination programme for 12–15-year-olds, which has reached only a fraction of pupils. Over 40 percent of schools had not received the single vaccine for their pupils by half term.

Other comments from head teachers reveal the dire state of education in the first half term:

"Things are far from 'normal' currently in schools and it does feel like we are being left to do our best to survive."

"At times we have really struggled to maintain face-to-face teaching."

"Pupil disruption is at an all-time high."

The government have no interest in the education of children. They have sent them back into schools with no defence against the virus. According to Office of National Statistics (ONS) data, education staff are now "more likely" than other workers to have COVID due to working with the "high infection rates among school aged children."

Virtually none of this finds its way into the mainstream media. Only grass roots campaign groups, including SafeEdForAll (Safe Education For All), have

continued to report on a half term of chaos for schools nationwide. Utilising social media and trawling through local press, SafeEdForAll co-founder Daniella Modus-Cutter has continued to compile weekly COVID-19 school outbreaks. In the week running up to half term, she compiled a list of known schools with COVID cases. From October 18-25, 209 English primary schools and 150 secondary schools had outbreaks.

The impact is devastating. In Birmingham, the UK's second city, 16 schools reported new cases amongst pupils in the week ending October 19. In the week running up to half term, one school in Devon lost a third of its workforce, a school in Wiltshire had to send two year groups home early for half the term and a Buckinghamshire junior school closed and moved to online learning. In Northamptonshire, one primary school had nearly 50 percent of pupils on leave with COVID-19 between the end of September and October 5.

In just one English county, Hertfordshire, more than 10,000 school children have tested positive for COVID since schools returned in September. In the last week of the half term, public health officials were dealing with outbreaks at 198 of the county's educational settings.

In Bradford, West Yorkshire, some schools have seen over 100 cases in a two-week period.

Dozens of schools in the county of Suffolk have seen COVID case rates in excess of 50 pupils, as 7,500 students have tested positive this term.

In Cornwall, rates are increasing at around 555 per 100,000 people, with half of all cases in school-aged children. Nine Maidens Academy in Cornwall moved to online learning for the last week of half term and Admiral Lord Nelson School in Portsmouth closed early due to a "rapid" rise in cases.

Local public health advisors have been forced to recommend that schools reintroduce limited mitigation strategies.

In Cambridgeshire, schools have brought back masks in communal spaces, social distancing for staff and online meetings where possible. Walsall council has advised primary schools to reintroduce bubbles and staggered lunch times and move all non-essential events online. Windsor Council has told schools to avoid mixing classes and to cancel assemblies.

Such mitigations cannot stem the spread of this highly infectious disease, yet councils refuse to go

further to protect staff and children and close unsafe schools outright. Some schools are going to extraordinary lengths to stay open. In Liverpool, Mab Lane Primary School has applied for permission to build an outdoor classroom.

Allowing COVID to rip through schools is the policy of not just the ruling Conservatives, but is shared by the opposition Labour Party and the trade unions.

The education unions have done nothing but write a joint letter on October 8 to Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi calling for token mitigations. There was no call to close schools due to the high level of infection, no mention of the numbers of children dying and no mention of the thousands of children now afflicted with Long COVID.

The main concern of the unions throughout the pandemic, no matter how many children are infected, get seriously ill, and even die, has been to ensure that schools stay open and function as holding pens so that parents can get back to work churning out profits for the corporations.

Earlier this month, Kevin Courtney, joint national secretary of the National Education Union (NEU), said, "It is evident that more needs to be done—and sooner rather than later— *to prevent further massive disruption to children's education*, caused either by children contracting COVID-19 or COVID-related staff absence." [Emphasis added].

With pupils already back in school in Scotland and as schools prepare to return in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, a fight for the elimination of the virus must be waged by all workers. This requires a struggle against the corporatist trade unions and the formation of independent rank and file committees that will lead the fight to close unsafe schools until they can be made safe and implement properly resourced remote schooling.

Join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, attend our meetings and receive the regular newsletter.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)