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By Tom Pearce
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More than 2,000 schools in UK hit by COVID-19 outbreaks as thousands of children and staff sent home

Almost four weeks into the full reopening of UK schools by the Conservative government and the lie that schools were ever "COVID-19 secure" has been shattered.

This week, almost one in five positive tests in England were in the under-19 age group, 19.7 percent of all tests. Latest figures form the Weekly Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) surveillance report show that educational settings account for 45 percent of positive cases.

Confirmed outbreaks of COVID-19 had hit 2,072 schools by noon Monday. Of these, 1,483 schools are in England, 313 Wales, 166 Scotland and 110 in Northern Ireland, according to research complied by the Tory Fibs organisation. Many schools have suffered multiple infections.

Thousands of children are being sent home to self-isolate, in some cases to isolate with vulnerable parents.

The government is keeping no central record of infections in schools, but the huge scale of what is being concealed was revealed by Liverpool mayor Joe Anderson. He tweeted Monday, "New infections of COVID-19 in this last week in Liverpool is 1,254, this has increased the numbers infected to approx. 5,000, it is doubling every six days. There are currently 8,000 school children at home self-isolating and over 350 teachers & staff."

All 1,700 pupils were sent home to isolate at one Liverpool school, after testing revealed 48 asymptomatic positive pupils—confirming in-school transmission—reported the Skwawkbox blog yesterday.

Matt Ashton, Liverpool's director of public health, reported that there were 242 positive coronavirus infections per 100,000 people in the week to September 24. This compares to Bolton's 211 cases per 100,000, previously the highest rate in the UK. He said Liverpool's cases were doubling every eight to nine days and 12.8 percent of people being tested were confirmed positive, which is classed as a high rate. There were infections in all age groups and "sharp increases" in COVID hospital admissions. He warned "increases in deaths are likely to follow."

Liverpool has a population of over 552,000, and this dire situation is undoubtedly replicated in many other towns and cities in the UK, including nearby Manchester, that also has a population in the hundreds of thousands.

Boris Johnson's government, with the support of the Labour Party and the trade unions, are desperate to keep the schools open to all pupils despite the horrendous conditions being experienced by teachers, pupils and parents.

Johnson announced a week ago a few enhanced national restrictions—which will do nothing to arrest the spread of the virus. But schools had to remain open. Johnson called for office workers to work from home again, if possible, while continuing to force 11 million pupils and teachers into small and unventilated classrooms as cases reach the highest since the height of the pandemic in April.

The maniacal drive to keep schools open means that local lockdown rules exempt grandparents so they can provide childcare for their families. Grandparents are generally of an age which makes them most prone to infection.

This measure came in as official figures show that incidents of groups being sent home from school because of COVID-19 have quadrupled in a week. Roughly 900 schools sent pupils home, with the attendance last Thursday showing four percent of schools not fully open—an increase of three percent from the week before. The figures revealed that over a million children have been off school, with the numbers higher in secondary schools compared to primary. Parents are then having to arrange last minute childcare if they are to continue to work.

Teachers are being used as cannon fodder for the disease yet are not able to get tested to diagnose their symptoms. When teachers are sent home, they and their families face a huge challenge to even access a test. The impact of inadequate testing has left teachers waiting for days to get tested. In some cases, staff are turned away because of the lack of testing facilities.

Headteacher Jenna Crittenden, at Platt Church of England primary school in Kent, said that she had been left without a deputy headteacher who was turned away from a testing facility. "Last week, my deputy head booked a test in Kent after two days of trying," she told the *Times Educational Supplement* (TES).

"When she got there they were turning people away as they had no tests, and when she said that could they ask to confirm she was needed back at work as a key worker, the gentleman went off to his supervisor and then returned to tell her that 'Teachers are not key workers and you need to go home and isolate'."

Many schools have been left with staff having to self-isolate for days awaiting a test or until they can receive their test result. Educators and parents are having to cope without any support from the government. Chief executive of the Chartered College of Teaching, Alison Peacock, told the TES that teachers are "spending hours on the phone seeking a testing appointment only to be turned away to call again the next day," or "turned away from a test centre because they were 'not considered a key worker'."

While Health Secretary Matt Hancock states that teaching staff with symptoms can get tested "so we can keep schools and classes open," the government has placed them only fifth on the list for rationed testing. The list does not include children.

The message is clear—teachers, get tested and then get back to your "COVID-19 secure" bubble of 30-200 children, with no social distancing and no PPE, you have nothing to fear!

The teaching unions have abandoned their members and will do nothing to fight the unsafe schools' reopening. Instead, they claim that adequate testing is the answer. Leader of the National Association of Head Teachers, Ruth Davies, said, "The inability of staff and families to successfully get tested when they display symptoms means that schools are struggling with staffing, children are missing school, and ultimately that children's education is being needlessly disrupted."

The crisis goes much deeper than the disruption of education. The conditions that teachers find themselves in is intolerable and unsustainable. There are reports on Twitter of teachers

having to teach combined classes in school halls due to teacher sickness and isolation. Teachers are trying to hold this all together, but many are exhausted and still feel unsafe.

Not only this, but any member of staff who comes in contact with the children is also at risk, with school bus drivers raising their concerns about lack of social distancing on their services, which are packed with children not wearing masks.

The Unite union feigned concern that it was "extremely worried" bus drivers were at risk of catching COVID-19 on "packed" buses. This is the same union that has overseen, along with management, the dangerous conditions that have led to the deaths of 33 London bus drivers.

Government guidance is that social distancing is not mandatory on dedicated school buses across the UK, leaving the decision up to the children and their schools to enforce the measure.

The BBC interviewed a driver in Northern Ireland who said his "bus carries children from eight different schools, who are on board for between 20 and 35 minutes." The pupils who are over 12 should be wearing facemasks but only around 50 percent on his bus do so.

Everyone who works in education is at risk and will remain at risk without further safety measures. The Socialist Equality Party calls for "all cases of COVID-19 [to] be immediately reported to staff and families and affected schools closed until testing and contact tracing establishes that it is safe to reopen." However, educators and parents are being kept in the dark.

Some school staff say they are not being told which students have tested positive for COVID-19. Teachers and parents are demanding more information be shared with them about cases at their schools. While some local newspapers run stories of school closures, there is nothing in the mainstream media about the thousands of cases that have inevitably broken out nationwide.

The advice that schools are getting from the government is totally inadequate. Last week, *Schoolsweek* reported that local Public Health England teams had left some schools "in 'limbo' waiting three days to get health advice." The Department for Education (DfE) then seized control of handling calls about school COVID-19 cases, yet even then the advice from the DfE was wrong.

Essex County Council are turning instead to the local Essex Contact Test and Trace Team for advice in the first instance, "rather than the DfE advice line," if they have a positive case.

The dismay over the deadly situation that educators have been forced into is reflected in a TES survey of more than 8,500 teachers and other school workers across Britain. It found that "nine in 10 school staff in England have limited or no trust in the government's management of the coronavirus and schools."

As every day passes, the pandemic is ripping through schools, colleges and universities.

Yet in UNISON, GMB and Unite's joint statement, "government must do more to keep schools open and safe," the emphasis is very much on *keep open*. Their only call is for the size of pupil bubbles to be reduced and for face coverings to be made compulsory on school buses. The unions only "encourage" wearing face masks inside schools, not that they be made compulsory. They call for full pay for lower-paid workers who need to isolate. But this is only because they know that one of their main demands—to increase the hours of cleaners in deep cleaning infected areas—will lead to infections.

As with the teachers' unions, the three unions—representing thousands of school support staff across the UK including teaching assistants, technicians, catering workers, cleaning staff, caretakers, and receptionists—are leaving workers to their own fate.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on all educators, teachers and students to take matters into their own hands and organise independently of the education trade unions in rank and file safety committees. Join the newly founded Educators Rank-and-File Committee and share your experiences, since returning to schools and campuses, with other workers.

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