

## UK: COVID runs riot

November 28, 2020

With the COVID-19 crisis still raging, teacher unionists in the UK have deplored the falling school attendance rates and presented a plan to secure safe schools and ensure quality education during the pandemic.

NEU: School attendance continues to fall in the face of the pandemic

On 24 November, the National Education Union (NEU) called attention to Department for Education (DfE) statistics that showed a collapse in school attendance due to the spread of coronavirus in schools. According to the DfE, 876,000 pupils did not attend school last week for reasons related to coronavirus.

More than one in five (22 per cent) secondary students and one in eight primary pupils (13 per cent) were absent. In three out of four (73 per cent) secondary schools, students had self-isolated, up from two-thirds (64 per cent) the week before. Almost one-third of primary schools (29 per cent) had students self-isolating, up from one-fifth (22 per cent) the week before.



The number of schools closed is still low (one per cent) but it has more than doubled compared with the previous week.

Government negligence

“This collapse in school attendance is the direct result of the Government’s negligence,” said Mary Bousted, NEU Joint General Secretary and member of Education International’s Executive Board.

She condemned the government for taking almost no measures to protect schools, students and educators from the spread of coronavirus. “We have always been waved away when we have called for action to protect schooling, and the Government has refused to look at including schools in a ‘circuit break’ to get cases in schools down. They have also refused to look at planning for reduced class sizes or school rotas to keep cases down.”

Pointing out that schools and teachers are “working incredibly hard to keep the system running without any support or resources from the Government”, she concluded that “the situation has reached a crisis point and the Government cannot let coronavirus run riot in schools any longer”.

NASUWT: Plan to keep schools safe during pandemic

On 13 November, NASUWT-The Teachers’ Union submitted a 10-point plan to the education ministers of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland - the four nations of the United Kingdom - to secure safe

schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Noting that teachers cannot teach and children cannot learn effectively where their health or safety is at risk, the plan calls on ministers to:

1. Demonstrate that they are following the scientific evidence and advice.
2. Strengthen the guidance to schools and colleges on ensuring COVID-safe and COVID-secure working practices.
3. Secure the updating and publication of health and safety risk assessments and equality impact assessments by school and college employers.
4. Publish weekly data on positive cases of COVID-19 infections of school/college staff and pupils by local government area.
5. Ramp up inspection and enforcement measures in schools and colleges, including more comprehensive use of spot checks and visits by the UK's Health and Safety Executive (HSE).
6. Take swift action to protect public health in the event of an outbreak.
7. Protect vulnerable teachers and support staff and pupils.
8. Strengthen the guidance to insist on effective social distancing in schools/colleges.
9. Establish a national plan for remote education/blended and distance learning.
10. Provide significant additional financial support for schools and colleges urgently to ensure the safety of staff and pupils, including extra funding for cleaning, personal protective equipment (PPE) and supply teachers.

NASUWT General Secretary Patrick Roach affirmed that "Governments and employers have a duty at all times, especially during this crisis, to do whatever it takes to ensure that schools and colleges are, above all, safe places for teaching and learning.

"To that end, the NASUWT has endorsed a 10-point programme of measures to enable the safe and sustainable provision of teaching and learning, which we strongly urge Ministers to consider and act upon."

Roach stressed that these measures are designed to protect the education of children and young people whilst "ensuring that our schools and colleges can continue to operate safely in the interests of children and young people and the education workforce, whilst the country continues to take the wider measures necessary in response to the pandemic threat and in order to protect public health".

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