

UNISON Schools committee on surging Covid cases in schools

UNISON's schools committee met on Tuesday 29 June and agreed the following statement and action plan in response to the rapidly rising Covid infection rate and resulting disruption in schools, as well as the Secretary of State for Education's announcement on plans to end self-isolation before the end of term:

"The rapid spread of the Delta variant in schools and disruption from self-isolation have been worsened by the government, who have rolled back some safety measures, such as removing face covering requirements in schools and increasing the size of bubbles. This has led to higher numbers of pupils isolating unnecessarily.

Urgent action is needed to reduce risks to pupils and end the disruption in schools. Ending self-isolation rules could keep infected children in classrooms and increase the spread of the virus into the community.

Allowing the virus to continue circulating in schools creates the perfect environment for new variants to develop, putting us all at risk.

The government needs to:

- Re-introduce previous rules on face coverings and reduce bubble sizes to prevent further disruption
- Give schools the funding and logistical support to implement stronger preventative measures, including improved ventilation and smaller bubbles to stop further transmission of the virus in September
- keep current measures on bubbles and self-isolation for close contacts in place for at the least the first half of the autumn term until there is clear evidence that there is not another transmission spike in schools.
- increase testing capacity at school so that pupils can be tested on site. Ongoing concerns about the accuracy of the rapid lateral flow tests, mean they should not be used as 'green light' for close contacts or as an alternative to self-isolation.

Failure to act will expose children to health risks. Although the risks to children are fewer than adults, they cannot be ignored. Data from the US shows that three times as many people aged 12 to 18 have been admitted to intensive care because of Covid compared with flu. Children are also affected by Long Covid, as can be seen by the NHS launching 15 Long Covid paediatric hubs for children and young people in England."

Next steps

UNISON has issued a press release and will be circulating a message to members and branches this week. We will also urgently lobby MPs and political leaders to support our action plan for making schools safer for pupils and staff.

We also be reaching out to other unions and hold a mass members online meeting before the end of term.