

UK government ditches advice on masks at English schools

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Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson gestures, during his visit to Appledore Shipyard in Devon, England, Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020. (Ben Birchall/PA via AP)

Following mounting pressure to change tack, the British government decided late Tuesday to ditch advice that high school students and staff

in England don't need to wear face masks when schools reopen from next week.

In another [abrupt change](#) in [coronavirus](#)-related policy, the government said children in [secondary schools](#)—those above 11 years of age—in areas under local lockdown rules, such as Greater Manchester, will have to don face [masks](#) when moving around corridors and communal areas. Though high school children elsewhere won't have to, the government said schools in England will have the discretion to require them in communal areas.

The government said face masks will not need to be worn in classrooms, because other protective measures, such as socially distanced seating, will be in place. It also said that face masks in the classroom may have an impact on learning.

"I hope these steps will provide parents, pupils and teachers with further reassurance," Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said.

The change in guidance comes in the wake of new recommendations from the World Health Organization that children aged over 12 should wear masks if socially distancing rules can't easily be followed and where transmission rates of the virus are a cause for concern. It also comes just hours after the Scottish government changed its advice to require all [secondary school students](#) to wear face masks in communal areas.

It's the government's second sudden change in policy on the education front in as many weeks following last week's decision to drop a controversial system to award grades for key high school exams after they had been cancelled because of the pandemic.

Opposition lawmakers criticized the Conservative government for only

changing policy in the wake of pressure.

Kate Green, the education spokeswoman for the main opposition Labour Party, said the change was "half-baked" and criticized the government for not making face masks compulsory in communal areas.

"Parents and schools needed clarity and leadership, but instead the government have just passed the buck back to them," she said.

The government is trying to reassure nervous parents that their children will be safe when they return to school. Schools across the U.K. closed in March as part of the lockdown and bar the return of a minority of some younger children in June, most students have not seen the inside of a classroom for the best part of six months.

"I think that the schools, the teachers, they've all done a fantastic job of getting ready and the risk to children's health, the risk to children's well-being from not being in school, is far greater than the risk from COVID," Prime Minister Boris Johnson said earlier alongside an indication that he was willing to change the stance of [face masks](#).

The evidence from around the world is that children face less severe virus symptoms than adults. However, they can be sources of transmission and governments around the world are grappling about how school reopenings will affect the virus' spread within families and in the wider community.

"In the absence of clarity, given the known detrimental impact of school closures, we must err on the side of caution in order to ensure that when schools reopen, they remain open," said Dr. David Strain, a clinical senior lecturer at the University of Exeter.

England's nearly 25,000 schools are due to reopen over the coming

couple of weeks, and Johnson's Conservative government is focused on making sure the return goes smoothly following the recent exam grades fiasco. That furor claimed its first casualty Tuesday with the resignation of Sally Collier, head of the exams regulator Ofqual.

Within the U.K., which has Europe's highest virus-related death toll at nearly 42,000, Scottish schools reopened first, followed by those in Northern Ireland. Schools in England and Wales are due to reopen in September.

Two weeks on from the reopening of schools in Scotland, one [school](#) in the city of Dundee has already had to close following an outbreak, a development that appears to have been at the heart of the change in face mask advice.

Following on from the change in WHO guidelines, the Scottish government confirmed earlier it was giving "obligatory guidance" to [high school students](#) to wear face coverings when moving around schools from Monday.

"It is right we reflect that in our guidance," Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said.

Scotland has often led the way within the U.K. during the pandemic on the wider use of face coverings. It, for example, mandated their use in shops after they reopened a couple of weeks before England. The Welsh [government](#) also said that it was considering a change of policy for high schools in Wales.

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