

UK schools to reopen, backed by frequent virus testing

March 7 2021, by Kelvin Chan



An empty classroom at Great Academy Ashton, as the school prepares for its reopening on March 8 after the latest lockdown curb the spread of coronavirus, in Ashton-Under-Lyne, England, Thursday, March 4, 2021. The school for approximately 1300 pupils aged 11 to 16 in Greater Manchester will have to conduct around 450 tests per day on pupils and staff in the first 2 weeks after the return of students on Monday. (AP Photo Jon Super)

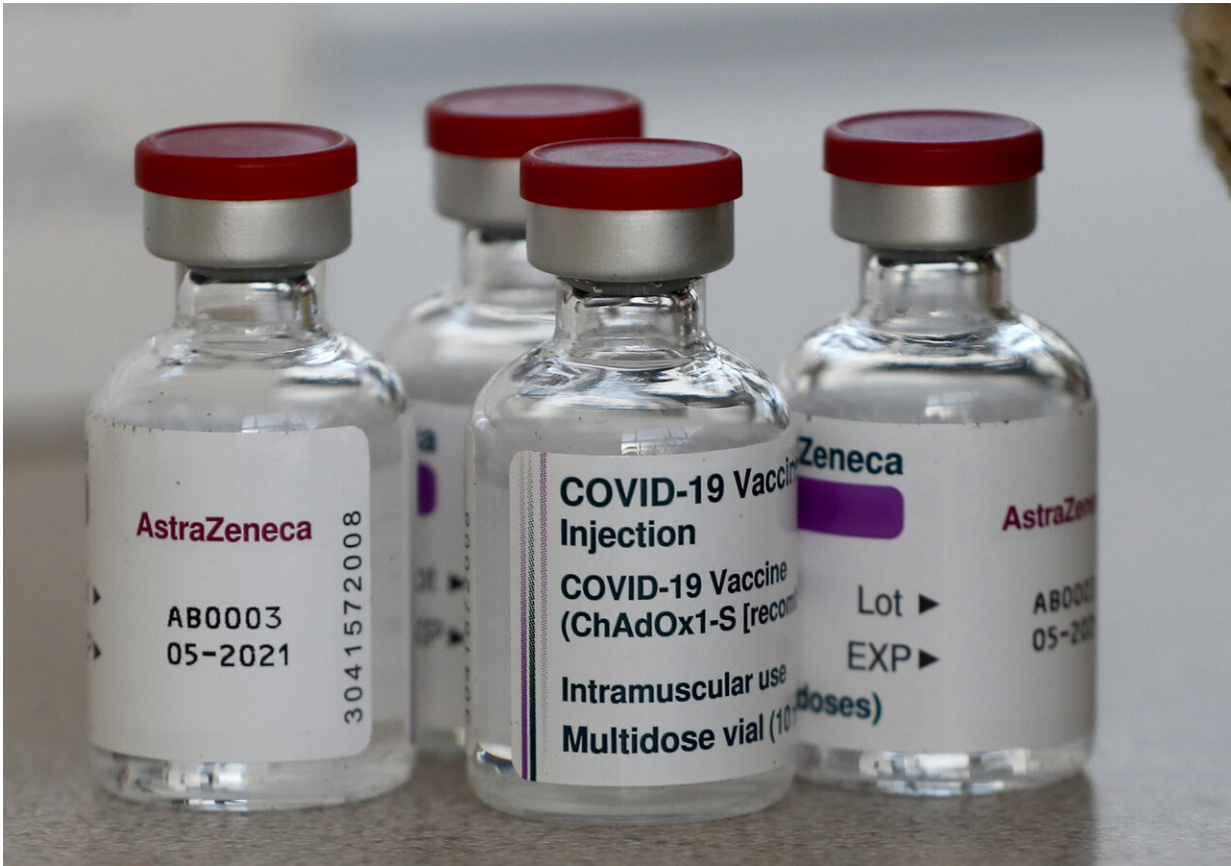
British students, backed by a robust coronavirus testing program, are gearing up to return to school Monday after a two-month closure, in what Prime Minister Boris Johnson says is a plan to get the country "moving closer to a sense of normality."

The reopening of schools is the first step in the U.K. government's plan to gradually ease COVID-19 restrictions as the country's vaccination drive gains [critical mass](#), with all restrictions lifted by June.

As part of the plan, millions of [high school](#) and [college students](#) coming back to U.K. classrooms will be tested for the virus for the first few weeks. Authorities want to quickly detect and isolate asymptomatic cases in order to avoid sending entire schools home.

"We are being cautious in our approach so that we do not undo the progress we have made so far," Johnson said [in a statement](#), urging everyone who is eligible to get vaccinated.

High schools and colleges will be allowed to reopen in phases to allow for three rounds of testing. Students will then get kits so they can [test](#) themselves twice more at home. The U.K. government has distributed nearly 57 million rapid "lateral flow" test kits to schools across the country, but there are concerns about the accuracy of the tests, which may result in pupils being forced to self-isolate unnecessarily



In this file photo dated Friday, Feb. 5, 2021, vials AstraZeneca vaccine ready to be used at the Wellcome Centre in London. Regulators in the U.K. and four other countries said Thursday March 4, 2021, they plan to fast-track the development and authorisation of modified COVID-19 vaccines to ensure drugmakers are able to move swiftly in targeting emerging variants of the coronavirus disease. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein, FILE)

A senior public health official, however, said Sunday that the risk of a false positive was very low. More than 5 million rapid tests have been carried out at schools during lockdown, including 1 million last week, the government said.

Evidence from testing over the past eight weeks indicates "the risk of

false positives is extremely low, less than 1 in 1,000," Susan Hopkins, the COVID-19 strategic response director for Public Health England, told the BBC. "And a test that returns less than 1 in 1,000 false positives is a very good test."

To help children forced into online learning for months to catch up with their education, officials are considering extending [school](#) days, shortening the summer holiday or adding an extra term to the year. British students already have a much shorter [summer holiday](#) than American students, usually leaving for summer break after mid-July.



An isolation area prepared for any students or staff with Covid symptoms, at Great Academy Ashton, as the school prepares for its reopening on March 8 after the latest lockdown curb the spread of coronavirus, in Ashton-Under-Lyne, England, Thursday, March 4, 2021. The school for approximately 1300 pupils

aged 11 to 16 in Greater Manchester will have to conduct around 450 tests per day on pupils and staff in the first 2 weeks after the return of students on Monday. (AP Photo Jon Super)



Britain's Health Secretary Matt Hancock during a visit to the Centre for Virus Research at Glasgow University in Glasgow, Scotland, Thursday March 4, 2021. Regulators in the U.K. and four other countries said Thursday, they plan to fast-track the development and authorisation of modified COVID-19 vaccines to ensure drugmakers are able to move swiftly in targeting emerging variants of the coronavirus disease. (Jane Barlow/PA via AP)



COVID-19 self-test kits, at Great Academy Ashton, as the school prepares for its reopening on March 8 after the latest lockdown curb the spread of coronavirus, in Ashton-Under-Lyne, England, Thursday, March 4, 2021. The school for approximately 1300 pupils aged 11 to 16 in Greater Manchester will have to conduct around 450 tests per day on pupils and staff in the first 2 weeks after the return of students on Monday. (AP Photo Jon Super)



A Covid testing area is constructed at Great Academy Ashton, as the school prepares for its reopening on March 8 after the latest lockdown curb the spread of coronavirus, in Ashton-Under-Lyne, England, Thursday, March 4, 2021. The school with approximately 1300 pupils aged 11 to 16 in Greater Manchester will have to conduct around 450 tests per day on pupils and staff in the first 2 weeks after the return of students on Monday. (AP Photo Jon Super)



David Waugh, right, principal of Great Academy Ashton walks in a Covid testing area, as the school prepares for its reopening on March 8 after the latest lockdown curb the spread of coronavirus, in Ashton-Under-Lyne, England, Thursday, March 4, 2021. The school for approximately 1300 pupils aged 11 to 16 in Greater Manchester will have to conduct around 450 tests per day on pupils and staff in the first 2 weeks after the return of students on Monday. (AP Photo Jon Super)



A student at Great Academy Ashton is taken through the Covid testing procedure, as the school prepares for its reopening on March 8 after the latest lockdown curb the spread of coronavirus, in Ashton-Under-Lyne, England, Thursday, March 4, 2021. The school for approximately 1300 pupils aged 11 to 16 in Greater Manchester will have to conduct around 450 tests per day on pupils and staff in the first 2 weeks after the return of students on Monday. (AP Photo Jon Super)



In this Thursday, March 4, 2021 file photo, students at Great Academy Ashton in Ashton-Under-Lyne, England, are taken through the COVID-19 testing procedure as the school prepares for its reopening on Monday March 8. British students, backed by a robust coronavirus testing program, are gearing up to return to school Monday after a two-month closure, in what Prime Minister

Boris Johnson says is a plan to get the country "moving closer to a sense of normality." (AP Photo Jon Super, File)



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"We're looking at a whole range of measures," U.K. Education Secretary Gavin Williamson told Sky News. "We've got to look at what is going to have the biggest positive impact on children's lives."

Britain has Europe's deadliest [coronavirus](#) outbreak, with nearly 125,000 lives lost so far. Its coronavirus vaccination program has, however, raced

ahead of the United States and the European Union to give at least a first dose to nearly [22 million](#) of the country's adults so far.

Britain has approved three vaccines for use: those made by Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca, and plans to vaccinate all adults by July.

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