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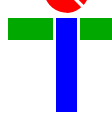
School self-isolation hitting poor pupils hardest

Experts say bubble system must end immediately as figures show that deprived schools are suffering more

By Camilla Turner, EDUCATION EDITOR; Ben Butcher; Harry Yorke, WHITEHALL EDITOR and Laura Donnelly, HEALTH EDITOR
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Campaign for Children



Children from the most deprived areas are hit hardest by [school self-isolation](#), The Telegraph can reveal, prompting MPs, scientists and former ministers to demand an immediate end to the bubble system.

On Tuesday it was revealed that a record 385,500 pupils [are off school as a result of Covid](#) – the vast majority of whom do not have the virus.

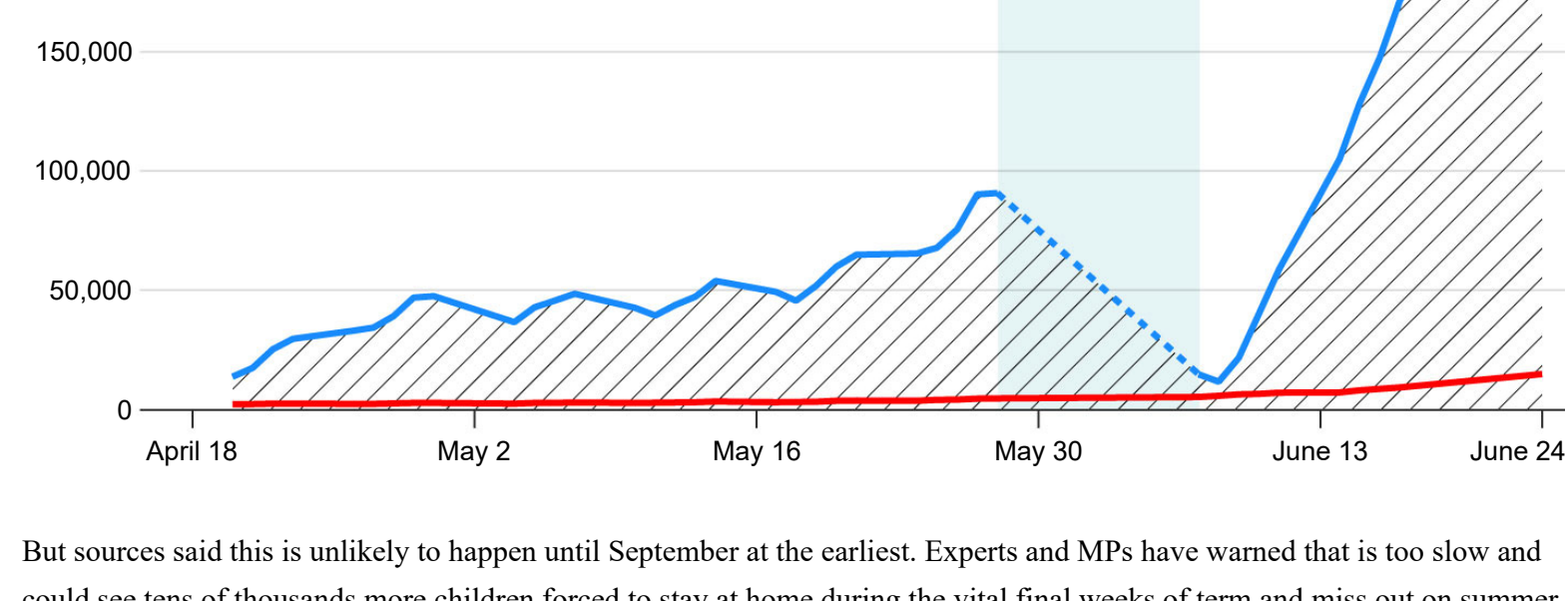
Youngsters in the most disadvantaged parts of the country are almost twice as likely as peers in wealthier areas to be forced to self-isolate.

This week The Telegraph has [launched a campaign](#) calling on ministers to put children first as the country recovers from its repeated lockdowns, with action to bring an end to the chaos in schools and address the harm caused.

It comes amid mounting concern about the impact of the disruption on children's education, with a major study finding that half of teenagers have been left [suffering anxiety and trauma](#) in the wake of the lockdowns.

Amid a growing backlash against the number of children [being forced to self-isolate](#) when a classmate tests positive for Covid, on Tuesday night the Government suggested it is prepared to end the bubble system in schools.

Self-isolation exodus from schools



But sources said this is unlikely to happen until September at the earliest. Experts and MPs have warned that is too slow and could see tens of thousands more children forced to stay at home during the vital final weeks of term and miss out on summer activities.

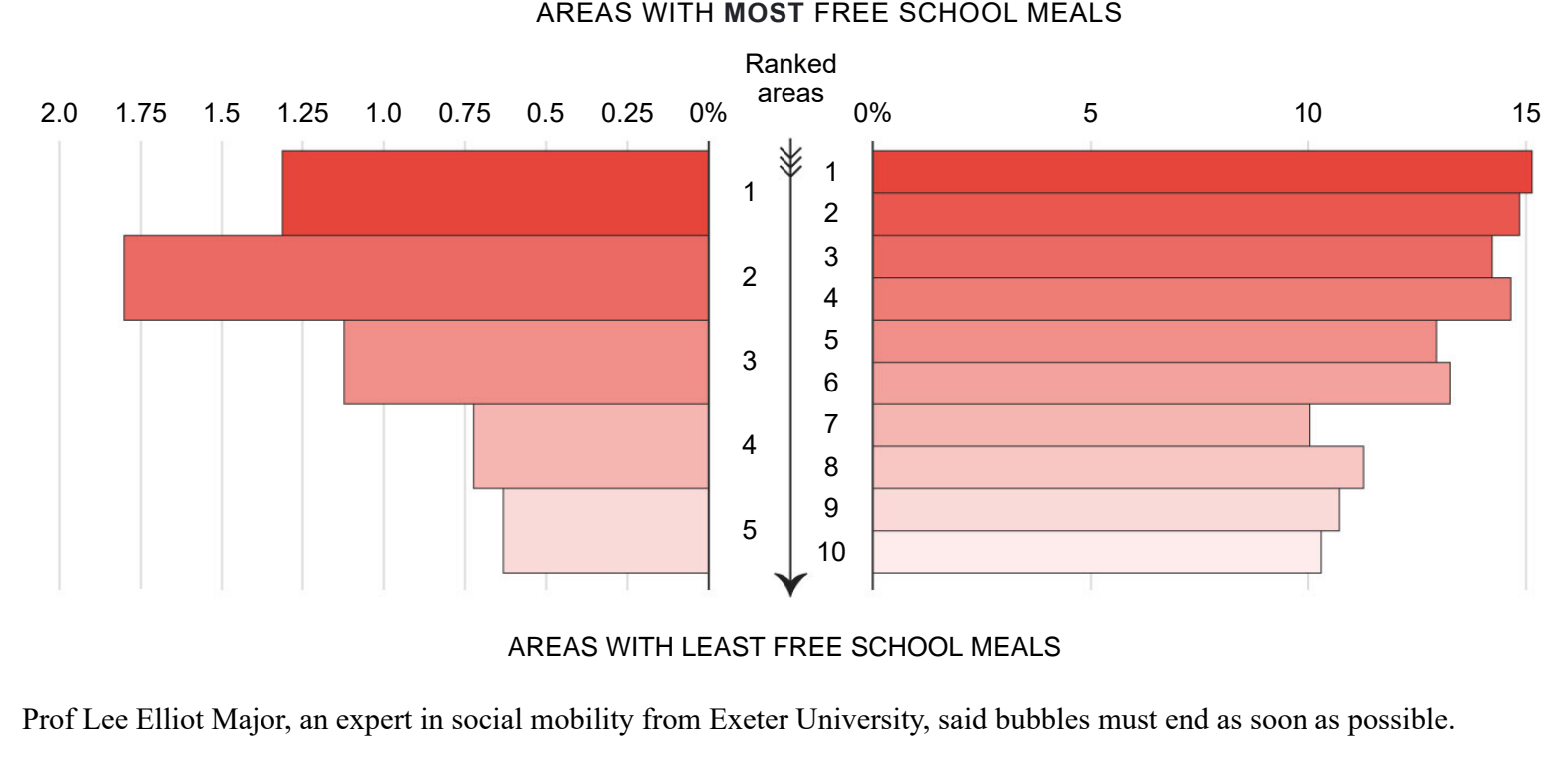
The former Tory leader Sir Iain Duncan Smith said ministers must end bubbles now with "no questions, no hesitations", while Steve Baker, the deputy chairman of the Covid Recovery Group, said ending bubbles and isolation for children "can't come soon enough" and he hoped [Sajid Javid, the new Health Secretary](#), would "act immediately".

Figures published by the Department for Education on Tuesday reveal that [385,500 pupils are off school as a result of Covid](#) – up from 249,500 the previous week and a record high since classes went back in March.

This includes 275,000 children forced to self-isolate because of a case at school, a 60 per cent increase in the space of a week. However, the official data also reveals that just 15,000 of these children have tested positive for Covid, up from 9,000 the previous week.

There is particular concern about the impact on the poorest children. A new analysis by the Telegraph shows that on average, 1.5 per cent of children in [the most disadvantaged areas](#) – where the highest proportion of children are on free school meals – have been self-isolating each week, compared to 0.8 per cent in wealthier areas.

School absences affecting pupils in the most deprived areas in England



Prof Lee Elliot Major, an expert in social mobility from Exeter University, said bubbles must end as soon as possible.

"The data confirms the trends that we have been seeing across the whole year of the pandemic," he said. "Poorer children were already behind in education, and they are being pushed back even further. A review of the bubble policy is long overdue."

Former education ministers also backed the calls, with Sir John Hayes saying bubbles should come to an end "promptly" and adding: "We should not be allowing everyone's education to be compromised in the way the bubble system clearly does."

Tim Loughton, a former children's minister, added that bubbles were causing "complete chaos" in schools and must "come to an end ASAP".

Robert Halfon, the chairman of the education select committee, said bubbles must be axed and the school day returned to normal, adding that the moves must come "before the economy, before anything".

Academy chiefs and headteachers also voiced exasperation at the number of children missing school.

Steve Chalke, the founder of Oasis Community Learning, which runs 52 schools, called the current situation "pretty alarming", adding that something needed to be done about pupils having to go into self-isolation in bubbles as soon as possible.

Meanwhile Glyn Potts, the headteacher of Newman RC College in Oldham, where 400 children have been sent home to isolate, said: "We cannot and will not write off the next four weeks of education as every day is crucial."

Cabinet ministers began to break ranks on Tuesday night, with one telling The Telegraph that the end of the summer is a "long time off" and saying: "The sooner this is dealt with the better. We've got such rapid and accurate testing that it seems to be a sensible route to go down. We also know that children are not at risk and that adults are [largely vaccinated](#)."

Pressure mounts to scrap bubbles

Telegraph View: Time to end this mad Covid school regime	Revealed: Boris Johnson's five-point plan to end schools chaos
Archbishop of York calls for end to school bubbles disruption	Face masks may still be needed in classrooms, says teaching union

Ministers agreed at a Cabinet meeting on Tuesday that it will be possible to "live with Covid in the future" due to the success of [the vaccine rollout](#). The latest figures show almost 85 per cent of adults have now had their first jab, while 62 per cent have had both doses.

Some of the country's leading scientists have urged ministers to act faster to restore normality for children.

Paul Hunter, a professor in medicine at the University of East Anglia, called for the system of bubbles and self-isolation to be dismantled without delay.

"I can't see a public health reason for applying that sort of regime any more – it is undoubtedly damaging their education," he said. "I wouldn't have restrictions on children going to [summer schools or camp](#), I wouldn't have systems of isolation. If children have [symptoms of Covid](#) they should stay home, but I wouldn't do more than that."

[Writing in The Telegraph](#), Prof Russell Viner, an adviser to the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage), said: "The key thing we must do for our children is give them back ordinary life as soon as we can."

On Tuesday, Gavin Williamson, the Education Secretary, said he was aware that some children are facing disruption and was working "to relax Covid measures in schools in line with wider work to remove restrictions across society".

Mr Williamson said officials were drawing up plans for a "new model" of keeping children at school and would examine the need for "ongoing isolation of bubbles".

A pilot is under way at around 200 schools in which pupils [take daily tests for a week](#) instead of isolating when a classmate tests positive.

Sir Kevan Collins, the former catch-up tsar who quit earlier this month amid a row over funding, said the Government's approach was "feeble" and called for a "massive national effort" to address the problem of lost learning.

How has your child been affected by lockdown? Let us know below