"I think school should be closed until the virus is brought under control"

UK student nurse and her daughter speak out on impact of pandemic

Our reporter
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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Elizabeth, a student nurse in her final year in Manchester, and her daughter Claire, aged 15, about their experiences during the pandemic.

Both contracted COVID-19, with Claire convinced that she was infected while in school. Since the reckless full reopening of school by the government at the start of September, classrooms have become one of the main vectors for the resurgence of the COVID-19 infections nationally.

According to official figures published Tuesday, around one in 10 children was absent from state schools in England last week for Covid-19 related reasons and the number of schools having to close due to a coronavirus outbreak doubled in the space of a week.

The *Guardian* reported, "More than 870,000 children were not in school last Thursday, with secondary schools the most severely affected. Nearly three-quarters (73%) reported at least one pupil off self-isolating—up from 64% a week earlier—and more than one in five secondary pupils were absent (22%).

"Figures published by the Department for Education showed that 82.9% of pupils were at school last week, down from 86.5% a week earlier. The impact on primary schools is also growing, with three in every 10 (29%) sending children home to self-isolate, up from 22% a week earlier."

"More than a third of schools (36%) now have one or more children self isolating—up from 29% last week—and the impact on affected schools is growing, with a quarter reporting more than 30 pupils off isolating, up from 9% at the start of the month."

Elizabeth explained how she was in a high-risk group as she had high blood pressure and was overweight, which made it "really scary to get it."

"When I got it, it was actually worse than when Claire got it." After Claire started with a cough, she fell ill two days later, "and it took me much longer to get on top of it, so I didn't find it safe to send her to school."

Claire explained how she had contracted COVID-19 at the end of October. "I know it's from school because I don't go anywhere else. I basically lived in lockdown regardless of everything that was open."

Concerned about the virus, she wore a mask at school for five and a half hours and took vitamin supplements to boost her immune system. She was particularly careful to use anti-bacterial wipes on shared facilities, such as toilets. "I stayed away from everywhere and only ate outside after washing my hands and sanitising."

Regardless of these precautions, she believes she still became infected at school.

"When I got coronavirus, they made me stay two to three extra hours. I told them that I had symptoms. I had a high temperature, dry cough and was even dizzy but the teacher tried convincing me it wasn't COVID-19 and was just because the seasons were changing."

Despite not feeling well and showing visible symptoms, she was told to go to the lunch room, "basically, telling me to socialise instead of sending me home."

Claire said, "I don't want to eat in school unless it's

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safe. The space that we have is absolutely tiny it's the size of a large bedroom, the doors were locked.

"When I told the teacher I couldn't eat, she was kind of mocking me for it, showing me with a hand gesture how I could unlock the door. If someone actually takes COVID seriously, you should respect them for that."

Staff refused to call her mother and would not let Claire use her own mobile phone to do so.

Claire described the conditions at her school. "They took the handles off the windows in the corridors, so you can't ventilate the area at all. The corridors are completely crowded, with no personal space to move at all. Everyone coughs in class. They never get asked if they're OK, or if they could put on their mask."

She explained how pupils were forced to participate in Physical Exercise classes indoors or faced being put in detention for refusing. At the morning assembly, there were 200 pupils gathered together.

"The Head of Year, who hands out all the toast to the kids at breakfast club, is off sick with COVID." She could be coughing on it, Claire said, "the dinner ladies don't wear masks when they are preparing food."

Claire complained that the toilets did not have lids, so that "everything splatters when they are flushed, it's not hygienic in the first place." She said that teachers were always asking her why she wore a mask so much. "It basically feels like harassment all the time."

"Even with the mask, I still managed to get it. I'm the only one who wears one, even in unstructured times. The staff don't enforce wearing masks. The masks they hand out aren't efficient and don't have a filter. Nobody really wears them."

Claire described how the school newsletter had referred to coronavirus as "a little flu".

"It's not a little flu for everyone. They don't know everyone's family situation. They shouldn't brush by it. That's really ignorant."

"If someone is constantly coughing in class and not feeling well, you feel bad whether you have a cold or the coronavirus. Having a cold makes you more susceptible to the coronavirus. You should be immediately sent home."

"I think school should be closed until the virus is brought under control… I don't think the government cares. It's not a little flu, people die from it!"

Elizabeth and Claire thought that setting up Rank-and-File Safety Committees in schools and workplaces was a good idea. Both intend to participate in the next meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee on Saturday, November 28 at 2pm. We encourage all educators, parents and students to join the committee and register to attend.

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