

Parent speaks out over situation at Portsmouth Academy, school of COVID-19 victim Jorja Halliday

Our reporter
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April May's son is registered at Portsmouth Academy, the school attended by Jorja Halliday, aged 15, who was killed by COVID-19 last week. Jorja was due to be vaccinated the day she died.

April told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I'm obviously terribly sad and shocked at what has happened. I really feel for Jorja's family, who are going through a lot.

"I've not been able to speak about it for a couple of days. With cases so high at the moment, it's such a worry. I know they say children are not affected as much and generally recover well. I just think the risk that we're putting to their health, in the long-term as well, is shocking."

April withdrew her child from his final year of primary school when the pandemic began and has not sent him into Portsmouth Academy since schools reopened due to concerns for his and others' safety.

She explained, "The safety measures in the school are mostly 'hygiene theatre'. There's a lot about 'catch it, kill it, bin it' and hand sanitiser, and there's a section in the risk assessment on ventilation, but it's not adequate in a pandemic where we've got an airborne virus.

"I've argued with the school since last year about the windows. That was a big problem for me. They put in the risk assessment that windows would only be open depending on the weather, and I just thought that the health and safety of children shouldn't be dependent on the weather. I believe that's something that's still in the risk assessment, they've just changed the wording.

"So, the windows are all supposed to be open. I've walked past the school on multiple occasions and not all the windows are open. Obviously, they're not really following it to the letter.

"Apart from that there's not any mitigations in place. There's no bubbles, there's no self-isolation, no masks."

April added, "Not isolating close contacts is insanity. There's no way that test and trace can be working out which children are at risk and which aren't. If they are not bubbling the children into groups, when they all use the same facilities, then that means they're all being put at risk...

"I don't feel like the problem is going to get any better while they're deliberately ignoring the scientific measures they could be implementing... It just makes no sense to me as to why they would be allowing schools to forget about all these safety measures and go on as if everything is normal."

Referring to data gathered by the SafeEdForAll (Safe Education for All) campaign group through a Freedom of Information request, April told us, "From the start of this term to October 2," the school had suffered "102 positive cases, in just over a month." She had "submitted two [FOI requests] at the end of last term and neither of them got a reply."

In general, in "all the conversations and correspondence I've had with the school, I've had very little response in regard to my questions on health and safety. I've basically been told, 'we're following the government guidance'. I asked for a current risk assessment at the beginning of term. It was only sent to me on the same day that Jorja passed away."

That risk assessment, April explained, "was signed on July 20, which would have been one day after [Prime Minister Boris Johnson's] 'Freedom Day'. I felt personally that the risk assessment was written with the new guidance in mind and not with the school's specific site and the situation in the classrooms in mind. I looked through the risk assessment and it does sound remarkably like the guidance—'living with COVID' and things like that written in it, which I didn't think was something

supposed to be in a risk assessment.”

April described the government’s policy of “learning to live with the virus” as “horrendous... especially with the overwhelming of the NHS [National Health Service]. I’ve seen people saying that we have to let COVID go so that we can get on top of cancer and other treatment backlogs. That’s just nonsense. To say that we’re going to let people get sick to treat people who are sick with something else!”

The government’s pandemic response had given “fuel” and “space” to the far-right, pro-mass infection HART group and the Great Barrington Declaration signatories.

The local Portsmouth City council has lined up with the government’s policy. They have “always been quite adamant that my son’s attendance is what they want to talk to me about and not the safety aspects of being at school at the moment,” said April.

When April spoke to the head of attendance at the council last September, “He said in that conversation, ‘We have got to get the economy open, we can’t all stay like this forever’.

“Since then, over the summer, I emailed all my local councillors, and my MP and my council leader... I’ve had a councillor that’s on the school board say that it builds their immunity... I’ve had another councillor saying that when teachers return to the classrooms, they expect to get colds, and flu, and things like this. And I just thought, that’s completely different to catching something that could kill them. It’s a very different thing.”

April continued, “I’ve been emailing [local Labour MP] Stephen Morgan for months, who said that he would try and get a Mike Stoneman [Portsmouth City council’s deputy director for children, families and education] to contact me. And then a couple of months later I emailed him again and he emailed me back saying, ‘I can’t get him to speak to you so I will try and get the head of the department for attendance at Portsmouth City Council’—the guy who at the beginning told me, ‘don’t worry about attendance, the school will sort it out’—and obviously I’ve not heard anything from anyone.

“I did notice, the week before last, that Stephen Morgan and [Labour’s shadow schools minister] Peter Kyle both visited the school. And I tweeted, questioning, ‘Why aren’t they wearing masks?’ He visited a library the day after and was wearing a mask. Why was it mandated in a library and not in a school?”

Pressure has been placed on April to deregister her child from Portsmouth Academy, something she does not want to do because she and her son “want to return to school

when we know it is safe. That’s what I’ve said all along.

“My son has never been allowed access to online learning through the school except during lockdown periods. Had I deregistered when they told me to, I wouldn’t have had even that... They’ve flat out refused to speak to me about any other education unless it’s in their building.”

Besides threats to her son’s education, April has been threatened with fines and prosecution. “I know so many people that have been pressured into sending their children back in this situation. And the stress it’s putting them through is disgusting... There’s a lot of refusing to cooperate with parents over children’s needs and they’re not even taking their own staff’s safety seriously.”

April thought the pandemic was “not something we’re ever going to fix until we can identify the problems and look at them in a more professional, scientific manner.

“I don’t think we’re going to fix it until we get Zero Covid... Countries have gone with that strategy and they’ve not pulled it off completely. It’s not a failsafe strategy, but I do think elimination and suppressing it as low as we possibly can is the best way to keep people safe. It was the better strategy.”

Speaking about last Friday’s October 1 school strike, April said, “It was fantastic, I was really pleased. Lisa [Diaz who called the strike] has been phenomenal... For it to have gone from a handful of mums sitting on WhatsApp talking, to something that has reached the whole world, in all different places, I found that outstanding. I think that’s amazing. And I’m so glad that other places are thinking about the same things and trying to make change and doing the right thing.”



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