

# Schools emerge as new hotbed for COVID-19 infection in South Korea

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The COVID-19 pandemic continues to worsen in South Korea, threatening to overwhelm the healthcare system, as daily infections and deaths continually reach new highs. On Friday morning, health authorities reported 7,022 new cases from the previous day. Only two days prior, the total reached a record-high of 7,174 cases.

In total, more than half a million people nationwide have been infected with COVID-19 during the course of the pandemic. Furthermore, on December 4, 70 deaths were reported from the previous day, also a record-high. In total, more than 4,130 people have been killed by COVID-19 in the past two years—approximately a quarter in the last month.

The latest hotbeds of COVID-19 infections are in schools and private after-school study academies. According to the Ministry of Education, 3,948 students under 18 were newly infected between November 29 and December 5.

In a month, infections have nearly doubled for elementary and middle school-aged students from 6.7 to 12.6 cases out of 100,000 people. This is nearly twice as high as working-aged adults. At present, only about 33 percent of adolescents between 12 and 17 are vaccinated while those 11 and under are not eligible to receive the vaccine.

The surge in cases among youth is linked to the full reopening of schools on November 22, though schools had gradually begun reopening throughout the year, when students attended classes in person or remotely on a rotating basis.

In the span of less than two weeks, two children under the age of 10 have died from COVID-19, the first children to pass away from the virus since the pandemic began. The Korea Disease and Control Prevention Agency (KDCA) announced the latest

child's death on December 7, stating that the six-year-old boy had died the previous day. The first child was a five-year-old girl who died on November 28, and only tested positive for COVID-19 after her death.

Both children had underlying health conditions. However, it is the policies of the government of President Moon Jae-in that bears responsibility for these, and other deaths. Seoul is pursuing a vaccine-only approach, mixed with very limited restrictions, often unenforced, on public gatherings. These include restricting groups to six people in the Seoul metropolitan area and eight in other regions, as well as requiring people to show proof of vaccination at indoor facilities like restaurants, movie theaters, and internet cafés.

Seoul's purpose, despite the obvious danger, is getting parents back to work to churn out profits for big business. The government is presenting the pandemic as largely over in order to do away with any remaining restrictions.

In addition to the surge in new cases, there is the new Omicron variant, of which at least 63 cases have been discovered in South Korea. When it became clear the Moon administration planned to take no serious action, the stock markets rose sharply. Both the KOSPI and Kosdaq markets finished above 3,000 and 1,000 points respectively on Wednesday. Both markets have surged to new highs during the pandemic, with KOSPI in January closing above 3,000 points for the first time and Kosdaq closing over 1,000 points for the first time in 20 years in April.

Son Young-rae, the spokesman for the Health Ministry, essentially rejected any new measures on Thursday, saying: "As strengthened social distancing measures took effect from Monday, their results will show from the end of this week. We are monitoring the

situation. We are discussing extra measures and the right time to put them into effect.”

In other words, while the country faces an immediate health crisis, the government is content to “discuss” possible future measures, any of which will be as toothless as the current ones.

The KDCA is now predicting that by the end of January daily cases could rise to as many as 11,000 per day. This is quickly overwhelming South Korea’s health care system, despite having nearly two years to prepare for such an explosion in new cases.

As of Friday, 852 COVID-19 patients are in critical condition, another record-high. Around the country, 78.8 percent of intensive care unit (ICU) beds had been occupied while 85 percent of ICU beds in the Seoul capital area had been occupied. Hundreds of people have also been left waiting for beds, with many arriving at hospitals dead.

Prime Minister Kim Bu-gyeom essentially admitted on Wednesday that the government was not prepared: “In the capital area, where 80 percent of the total cases are reported, we continue to add hospital beds with active cooperation from the medical community, but it is still tough to catch up with the pace of rising cases.” The Seoul region is densely populated and home to approximately half the country’s nearly 52 million people.

The government’s claim that vaccinations alone would be enough to initiate the so-called “with COVID” era, or living with the deadly virus, is falling apart. Vaccines are just one aspect of a campaign necessary to eliminate COVID-19, which includes strong social distancing measures.

The population is more vulnerable now as the new Omicron variant takes hold. At present, approximately 80 percent of the population is considered fully vaccinated with two doses while only 10 percent have received a third booster shot. Yet new information coming out about the contagious nature of the Omicron variant indicates that people will need at least three doses of the vaccine to be protected.

In addition, the vaccine pass system is experiencing push-back from confused and right-wing layers, to which the government is quickly bowing. Jo Hui-yeon, the superintendent of education in Seoul stated on December 7, “We are encouraging inoculation in regards to the seriousness of the COVID-19 situation,

though it eventually is up to one’s own decision.” This is instead of requiring all workers and students to be vaccinated and working with scientists to educate the population as well as providing relief for those unable to be vaccinated for genuine health and age reasons.

The issue is not one of personal choice when those vaccinated can still catch and spread the disease, including to those unable to be vaccinated. Claims by officials like Jo are meant to push the belief that being vaccinated is enough in order to allow the government to continue lifting any restrictions on big business while forcing the population to suffer in the name of corporate profits.



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