

UK schools kept open as child infections soar above 3 million

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Despite soaring COVID cases among children, teaching staff shortages and case numbers swamping the National Health Service since Omicron became dominant, the Johnson government is intent on keeping schools, nurseries and early years settings open.

The sole consideration is keeping parents free to go to work and continue churning out profits for the corporations.

On January 5, the horrific milestone of 3 million children (aged 0-19) being infected with COVID in England was reached. This is a substantial section of the 14.6 million total cases of COVID among all age groups recorded throughout the UK, including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, since the start of the pandemic. By January 8, the Long Covid Kids campaign group reported a record 30,220 daily cases of COVID child infections in England. On January 10, this had shot up to 40,343.

The murderous policy of herd immunity has led officially to over 150,000 deaths in Britain, including 128 child COVID fatalities.

Plans to reduce quarantining to five days, end free lateral flow testing, and confine vaccination to the most vulnerable will worsen the catastrophe.

The highest infection increases are now among the youngest and least protected—primary school children (4-11), who remain unvaccinated, and young adults. According to Long Covid Kids, there were 1,969 UK child hospital admissions in December. For six months in a row, child hospital admissions exceeded 1,000.

In England, 84 children were hospitalised with COVID on Christmas Day. Over the 12 days of Christmas, a horrifying 1,294 children were admitted to hospital with COVID. Official data for January 1-6 shows child COVID admissions represent over 6 percent of all COVID new admissions, or 747 out of a total 12,202 total hospitalisations in England.

Omicron affects the 0-5 age group more than previous variants. This appears to be the case because Omicron replicates in the upper respiratory airways rather than the lungs, unlike the Delta variant, and infants are particularly

susceptible to infections in the upper respiratory tract. Long Covid Kids reported that hospital admissions in London for the under-fives leapt five times higher in a month.

During the pandemic, case rates for 0-5 and 6-17 age ranges were even. According to official data compiled by SafeEdforAll (Safe Education for All) member @TigressEllie, from December 1-12 there were 20 COVID hospital admissions among those 0-5. This shot up to 94 when Omicron took hold. Omicron was first detected in Britain on November 27.

While secondary school children aged 12-15 are being offered the vaccine, though roll out is pitifully slow, the government decided against vaccinating 5-11-year-olds unless clinically vulnerable. Since Omicron, secondary school children are required to wear masks in classrooms but are not being supplied with masks such as FFP3s that afford protection against airborne transmission—and not in communal areas. Secondary teachers are required to wear masks in classrooms, but government guidance advises that teachers not wear them when they are teaching in front of class.

The situation is more dire in primary schools—no masks for anyone, no vaccines, no mitigation measures at all.

Between December 13 and December 21 last year, parent Daniella Modos-Cutter on Twitter group #SafeEdForAll found that 172 primary schools had positive cases and there were positive cases in 86 secondary schools. These figures she compiled are an underestimate as the research is dependent on local information being obtained and passed to her. Before Omicron and the beginning of vaccination for children aged 12 plus, there were more cases in secondary schools.

Schools Week noted that Arbor Statistics, taking information from a school management information system covering over 1,600 schools and 200 trusts, found that pupil absences due to COVID in the first week of this term had already reached 3.3 percent. 82 percent of schools reported at least one positive case. This compares to 69 percent on the last day before the break.

Since schools reopened around January 4, staff absences due to COVID are causing mayhem. Some schools were forced to close partially or send entire year groups home.

In a survey of 2,000 heads by the National Association of Headteachers, 36 percent reported more than one in 10 staff absences on the first day of term, while 9 percent reported one in five, a figure Conservative government Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi said was likely to rise.

A further 37 percent said they were unable to access supply cover for absent teachers. Supply firms reported little response from the government's insane appeal to retired teachers to risk their lives and return to the classroom to plug the gap.

The biggest Academy trust, United Learning, reported last week "at least a couple of hundred staff off." Due to lack of staff, the Outwood Academy in Middlesbrough closed years 10 and 11 classes on January 5. Outwood Academy Bydales, in Redcar and Cleveland closed its year 10 class. The Oasis Community Learning school in Birmingham shut completely. St Stephens C of E Primary in Bradford reported six staff absences.

The Co-op Academy in Swinton sent its Year 8 pupils home to learn remotely for three days from January 7. Also in Greater Manchester, Moston Fields Primary school shut its reception class, while Haveley Hey Community school sent its year 6 pupils home. Parklands High school in Lancashire decided to teach pupils remotely one day a week on a staggered basis.

A spokesperson for the National Association of Primary Education, Peter Cansell told the *TES* that due to widespread staff shortages, the education of children has been "largely abandoned in favour of childcare."

Some heads are ignoring government guidance and are reintroducing bubbles or staggered starts to the school day.

Stuart Guest, head of a primary school in the West Midlands, told the *TES* that contrary to the current advice on quarantining for seven days, his school was sticking to the previous 10-days after infection to try and curb viral spread. Another head tweeted that when he tried to do the same, his local authority blocked it.

Guest said he ordered air purifiers for each class out of the school's budget, as government promises to improve ventilation with CO2 monitors and air filters is not forthcoming.

According to pollster *Teacher Tapp*, 47 percent of teachers in primary and 73 percent of teachers in secondary schools did not have a CO2 monitor in their classroom. While the Health and Safety Executive recommends well ventilated rooms are kept below 800 CO2 particles per million, schools can only apply for a HEPA filter for a classroom if the CO2 monitor in class registers above 1,500 for a week, and

remedial work cannot be done by the end of February.

The government is providing 7,000 HEPA filters, *just one for every three schools*, as Zahawi said providing more would "waste taxpayers' money." There are 300,000 classrooms in schools in England alone!

So long as schools and educational settings remain open, and the virus is not suppressed, children are in danger not just of infection but Long COVID. Around 20,000 children are suffering from its debilitating effects a year after initial infection. Office for National Statistics data revealed the education sector has more adult Long COVID sufferers than any other workplace.

The government is embracing this catastrophe as the new norm, no matter how many lives are lost. Speaking to *Sky News*, Zahawi said chillingly, "I hope we will be one of the first major economies to demonstrate to the world how you transition from pandemic to endemic, and then deal with this however long it remains with us, whether that's five, six, seven, 10 years."

As heads warn that schools are "teetering on the edge," Zahawi's advice to deal with a dire lack of staff is to merge classes which could result in a doubling or even trebling of class sizes to 60 or 90. He also advised that support staff, who are not qualified teachers, should teach. This alone exposes the lie that schools are being kept open in the interests of children's education.

On Tuesday, January 11 at 7p.m. the Educators Rank-and-File-Safety Committee (UK) is hosting an emergency meeting, "Close All Schools To Stop the Spread of Omicron!", to discuss a fightback against the uncontrolled spread of COVID-19. We urge all teachers, parents and students to attend. Register for the event here.



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