

Johnson ends mask-wearing in English schools

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Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced in Parliament on Wednesday that the wearing of masks in secondary schools in England would be ended with immediate effect within 24 hours.

He did so to cheers from Conservative MPs, as he announced that all remaining mitigations against COVID under the current Plan B are to be terminated on January 26.

Johnson declared, "From tomorrow, we will no longer require face masks in classrooms and the Department for Education will shortly remove national guidance on their use in communal areas."

The removal of the sole remaining mitigation measure in schools guarantees the further spread of COVID among pupils, educators and the wider community. It is proof positive that the Conservative government is pursuing a herd immunity programme.

With the massive spread of Omicron, when schools returned in January the government was forced to advise that masks be worn in classrooms and teaching spaces for pupils and students in Year 7 (aged 11 or above). While limited, this did hinder the spread of COVID in secondary schools. One only has to compare the terrible spread of COVID, illness and hospitalisations among primary school children, who were not mandated to wear masks, during the same period.

The announcement came the day after Britain recorded 438 COVID deaths, the highest since February. Tragically, another boy was announced dead from COVID on January 14, taking to 135 the total number of children who have died from COVID in Britain since the beginning of the pandemic.

The return to school from January 4 has produced an avalanche of infections among educators and children alike. A poll by Teacher Tapp for the Sutton Trust charity, reported by Schools Week, found that in the week to January 14 one in five state schools had COVID related

absences in staff of 10 percent. Three in 10 of the most deprived schools reported the same. Private schools with smaller class sizes had one in eight.

Department for Education (DfE) data showed staff absences rose to 60,000, most having tested positive. High absenteeism was compounded by delays in delivering testing kit to schools. A Teacher Tapp survey found that only a third of schools received tests on time, and 17 percent still had not received any by January 14. Government guidance advises twice weekly testing at home, or daily for seven days if living with someone who is positive in order to attend school.

DfE figures show that pupil absences had already reached an estimated 315,000 or 3.9 percent on January 6.

Rising hospitalisations and deaths grew fastest among the 0-9 age group. COVID cases in England for January 18 in the 0-4 age group rose from the previous day to a total 306,476, and there was a rise to 771,367 total cases among the 5-9s. On the same day, cases among all children aged 0-19 increased by 34,439 (40.5 percent of the 84,987 total new cases in England).

For the same day, as 118 children were admitted overnight, total child COVID hospitalisations rose to 15,805.

Figures released by Long Covid Kids revealed a total 1,574 child hospital admissions just in the period January 1-13. With over 3 million children infected with COVID, the incidence of Long COVID among them is staggering. One in 380 of all UK children have been symptomatic for a year, 20,000 in total, while one in 470 in the 2-11 age range have symptoms for three months.

This horrific picture of death, disease and misery begs the question: how are the ruling elite getting away with it? The government is despised and wracked by crisis. But what are the trade unions doing?

The National Education Union (NEU) has 460,000 members, the NASUWT has 313,000. Together with the

National Association of Headteachers, the ASCL, GMB and Unison, these organisations have a million and a half members. Around 80 percent of UK education workers are unionised. Teachers are 97 percent unionised, with education the highest unionised sector in the UK and the European continent, if not the world!

The unions have prevented the mobilisation of this potential army of opposition. Alongside parents, educators could have enforced the necessary well-resourced remote learning, helping to halt the spread of the virus and prevent the collapse of the National Health Service. But the unions have instead insisted that “schools are the safest place for children to be” and that “schools must stay open” no matter the consequences.

In June 2020, when the government first tried to reopen schools as part of ending the UK’s first lockdown, the unions merely called for a two-week delay. By the start of the new term in September, the NEU had ditched its own five criteria for the safe reopening of schools—the *R* rate being below 1, test, track and trace being in operation, social distancing in place and the protection of vulnerable staff, allowing schools to reopen.

On January 3, 2021, a record 400,000 NEU members attended an online Zoom meeting demanding the closure of schools as the pandemic was out of control. The NEU and other unions lent support to individual members who boycotted schools under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996, but this was only to cover their refusal to organise the walkouts teachers were calling for. When the government tried to reopen primary schools on January 4, teachers stayed away in their thousands. Faced with a movement that would galvanise wider opposition in the working class, the government introduced what Johnson said would be the last lockdown.

On January 28, 2021, the NEU launched its Education Recovery Plan, predicated on the notion that schools could open safely before the virus was suppressed with a few mitigation measures like CO2 monitors and HEPA filters. By March, the union was instructing its members to desist from using Section 44 without its permission, when rank and file members were demanding a strike ballot.

Last November, after the NEU had collaborated with the government to ensure schools were back open for the autumn term, the union’s joint general secretary Kevin Courtney was actively crusading against “education disruption” and for keeping schools open.

As the spring term began in 2022, the education unions issued a joint statement endorsing the reopening of

schools, despite Omicron running rife. The NEU marked the first anniversary of the January 3 mass meeting with a union reps only meeting and a statement that did not even mention child hospitalisations or deaths.

The complicity of the unions was applauded by former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. Corbyn responded to an NEU post on social media with the statement, “I fully support the NEU union call for urgent action to reduce Covid disruption, including through funding for improving ventilation.”

Nothing that the cabal of murderers in Downing Street do will elicit any fight from the union bureaucracy. In response to Johnson’s announcement on masks, the NEU only complained that this could result in further “education disruption”. Mary Bousted, NEU joint general secretary, said meekly, ‘Schools and colleges are still feeling the impact of Covid-19’, before advising, “The danger is we lift restrictions too quickly before the effects of returning to school are clear. This will result in more education disruption which is extremely worrying...”

There was no call to close schools. Instead, there was an appeal that the “Government should be exercising a duty of care to the nation’s pupils and the staff who educate them.” All that was required was that the Tories get the necessary “ventilation and filtration solutions in place... now to ensure interruption of education remains at the minimum.”

The Labour Party is once again fully behind the government. Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting announced in last week’s *Mail on Sunday*, “For the sake of our children we can never shut our country again... Learning to live well with Covid will prepare us to get through the next wave of infections without more restrictions on our lives, livelihoods and liberties.”

On January 11, the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) held an emergency meeting to discuss the strategy to “Close All Schools To Stop the Spread of Omicron!” We urge all educators, parents and students to join the Committee as part of the global fight to eliminate the virus. Follow the Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) Twitter account here.



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