

UK schools inspectorate blames COVID-19 “bubble mentality” for pupil absences

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Ofsted, the UK school’s inspectorate, has complained of a COVID-19 induced “bubble mentality” that is making school pupils “reluctant” to return to school.

The “bubble” cited was the practice of dividing classes and year groups into smaller groups to mitigate school transmissions of COVID-19. This was ended last July and government guidance now insists that pupils should only miss school if they have tested positive themselves or have symptoms and are awaiting the results of a PCR test.

Ofsted’s report, “Securing Good Attendance and Tackling Persistent Absence,” complains that the “bubble mentality” persists with the result that attendance in state-funded schools fell to 87.4 percent on January 20, with 415,000 pupils off for Covid-related reasons. Pre-pandemic, the overall absence rate in 2018-19 was 4.7 percent.

Ofsted acknowledges that the overwhelming reason for absence was children infected with COVID but complains that “parents’ and pupils’ anxieties” are also having an impact, with children “unnecessarily” being kept home after being in contact with an infected person.

It says that parents and pupils are not keeping to government guidelines because they are “finding it hard to move on from the ‘bubble-isolation mentality’”. It blames some parents (an unspecified number) for using the pandemic as an “excuse” to keep children at home by claiming they have “possible Covid”.

The report was published amid a vast increase in rates of infectivity among children especially. In the last week of January, one in eight primary pupils had COVID—the highest prevalence for any age group at any stage during the pandemic. Among secondary pupils, the infection rate was 7.6 percent for those in years 7 to 11—one in 15. This compares to an overall rate of one in 20 people in England.

This is a direct result of abandoning all mitigations. The government officially ended guidance for mask wearing

in schools on January 20, leading to the explosion in cases. Now Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who demanded “let the bodies pile high, no more fucking lockdowns”, is enforcing his pledge through plans to abolish all COVID mitigations, including the legal requirement to isolate after testing positive, from February 24 in England.

In blaming a “bubble mentality” for school absences, Ofsted turns reality on its head. As far as the inspectorate is concerned, the problem is not the spread of COVID—the consequence of the criminal policy of “herd immunity” that has patently failed to produce immunity—but parent/pupils “anxiety”.

The report is especially grotesque given that Ofsted had largely suspended inspections for an extended period because it considered schools so unsafe due to COVID. Nonetheless, it has consistently argued that staff and pupils can be exposed to the danger.

That the body responsible for maintaining standards in educational facilities expresses no concern whatsoever with the health and wellbeing of those whose welfare it is supposedly supporting is criminal.

January saw a record number of child COVID deaths, with 16 children dying in England’s hospitals. It was the highest number since the pandemic began and followed a previous record in December when 14 children died. Among the child fatalities in January, four were aged 0-4 years. On February 5, another child, a little girl aged 0-4 died bringing the total number of child deaths to 148 in UK.

According to Long Covid Kids, 48 percent of all child COVID deaths have occurred since the cynically named COVID “Freedom Day” on July 21, 2021. One in 13 of all COVID hospital admissions is a child aged 0-19 years. One in 23 deaths of 5–19-year-olds involved Covid-19.

Tens of thousands suffer long term health problems with 117,000 children and young people now living with Long COVID. One in 470 of all UK 2–11-year-olds are

symptomatic for three months, and one in 380 12–16-year-olds for one year.

The Ofsted report is based on a lie: that the pandemic is all but over and people's concerns are irrational. A further 41,270 positive COVID cases in the UK were reported Sunday, together with 52 deaths within 28 days of a positive test. The decline in positive daily reported cases is largely due to the abandonment of testing requirements, making it harder to obtain PCR tests. Office for National Statistics data based on swabs collected from randomly selected households, suggests infection levels remain high.

There is no scientific basis for ending all COVID restrictions. Scientists have responded with horror to the government's plans, with demands that the government's chief scientific advisers, Sir Chris Whitty and Sir Patrick Vallance, present the "evidence" on which this is based.

The UK Health Security Agency has said it is officially tracking a super-mutant "Deltacron" variant, thought to have evolved in a patient who caught Delta and Omicron at the same time. The agency said it did not know how infectious or severe the new variant is, and whether it can escape vaccines but said it was "not concerned" because case numbers are "low". It did not reveal these numbers.

The attack on a COVID "bubble mentality" is politically motivated. The Ofsted report follows demands by Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi for a close examination into low attendance rates in schools in England, as part of his insistence that "we must do everything we can" to keep schools open.

Health Secretary Sajid Javid has backed the ending of all restrictions by the end of this month "because we cannot eradicate this virus and its future variants. Instead, we must learn to live with COVID in the same way we have to live with flu."

This murderous policy faces significant resistance. A YouGov poll found three-quarters of the 4,500 Britons surveyed believe the self-isolation requirement after a COVID-19 positive test should remain in place. It is this instinctive and healthy opposition that is the target of the Ofsted report.

Parents such as Lisa Diaz and Sarah Paxman have been threatened with fines, prosecution and even imprisonment for their justified efforts to protect their children from unsafe schools.

The real reason for keeping schools open and ending all mitigations is ensuring parents can be forced into unsafe workplaces to guarantee the profits of the corporations and super-rich. In the right-wing *Telegraph*, Matthew

Lynn cited the Ofsted report as proof of a "widespread reluctance to leave the Covid cocoon [that] is toxic when combined with our 'me, me, me' culture."

"Until we can break free of the shadow of lockdown the country will never get back to normal, nor get anywhere close to its full potential," he wrote. "And the problem is not confined to schools" with the "bubble mentality" "blending into an already egocentric 'me culture' that insists that life should revolve around the individual employee and their personal needs, rather than the needs of the customer, the company or the public."

The condemnation of prioritising lives, health and wellbeing as "egocentric" and "toxic" speaks to the fascistic mindset in ruling circles. But it goes unchallenged by the Labour Party and trade unions who agree that the bottom line is preventing "disruption" to the economy.

A joint statement by the main education unions complains that the government has withdrawn mitigations "prematurely... leaving schools and colleges exposed to high case rates and severe educational disruption." Its proposed "measures to slow the spread" of COVID in schools, consists of "advice" on masks, social distancing, risk assessments and other mitigations already abandoned by government.

The removal of all measures against the pandemic exposes the class issues involved in the fight against COVID. As the WSWS explained, "In the third year of the pandemic, the fight for the global elimination of COVID must be connected to a mass social, political and revolutionary movement of the working class, which has as its aim the complete restructuring of social and economic life. At its most fundamental level, the pandemic has exposed the bankruptcy of capitalism and, therefore, the necessity for socialism."



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