UK schools in crisis as COVID surges, with cases highest among youngest and unvaccinated

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The rampant spread of the BA.2 COVID variant through British schools is barely mentioned in the media.

Mitigation measures in education settings, which were already at a bare minimum, were removed entirely on January 19. Twice-weekly free testing ended in most schools on February 21. On April 1, it will end in special schools, leaving children with comorbidities undefended against the virus.

The latest figures published Tuesday by the Department for Education (DfE) showed that more than 200,000 pupils could not attend school March 17 due to COVID. Recorded cases had tripled in two weeks. Of the 202,000 pupils, 159,000 were absent with a confirmed COVID case—up from 45,000 on March 3. Another 16,000 pupils had a suspected case of coronavirus, up from 6,000 earlier in the month.

Most worrying is the increase in the number of serious COVID cases involving younger children, including babies. Data compiled by SafeEdforAll (Safe Education for All) member @TigressEllie, found that admissions to hospital among those aged 0-5 doubled in two weeks, from 218 to 432 on March 9. A similar increase took place for 6-17-year-olds.

Office for National Statistics (ONS) data reveals the highest infection rates in all age groups are among 2-11-year-olds. This age group remains unvaccinated in the UK, yet is expected to attend pre-school settings, nurseries and primary schools with no mitigation measures in place at all—no masks, no appropriate ventilation, no social distancing.

The above graph shows child COVID hospital admissions throughout the pandemic. It was published by Independent Sage member Professor Christina Pagel. Referring to all age groups, Pagel tweeted March 19, "deaths within 28 days of +ve test [positive] are flat in

UK as a whole, but this wave is still recent… and might end up higher than first Omicron wave."

Rising case numbers have prompted scientists to demand the Conservative government roll out vaccinations for 5-11- year-olds. This was approved by the UK's Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation on February 16, but no plans have been enacted for the necessary mass vaccination campaign.

The *Guardian* reported in January data from the US Centres for Disease Control showing unvaccinated 5-11-year-olds were three times more likely to end up in hospital than those with two jabs. To date, only a quarter of 12-15-year-olds have received a second dose in the UK.

Meanwhile, the number of schools in England self-reporting COVID cases is accelerating. Figures compiled by parent Daniella Modos-Cutter show cases in at least 167 primary schools, 27 secondary schools, 9 combined schools, three colleges and eight pre-school settings between February 28 and March 14. Schools in Essex, Greater Manchester, Gloucester, Newquay, and Cardiff and Merthyr in Wales sent classes home due to staff off sick with COVID last week.

On Monday, at least 11 schools in Hampshire closed or sent some classes home due to COVID outbreaks. Three schools in Essex have also moved to temporary online learning due to staff sickness.

Speaking to the WSWS this week, Dr. Stephen Griffin, a virologist at Leeds University said, "[L]ast autumn the government got rid of all the mitigations pretty much in schools because they felt that it was more important to get kids in school at no matter the cost and just assumed the level of harm that would happen would be acceptable. And in my view, I don't think it has been [acceptable]."

Teachers speaking out on Twitter describe a nightmare

scenario as staff struggle to maintain the education of their pupils while falling sick with COVID themselves.

A tweet by headteacher Caroline Derbyshire, shared hundreds of times, read, "So many school leaders are struggling to keep schools open because of the highest yet numbers of staff who are sick with Covid. Many schools now have alternating year groups working from home. This level of disruption seems to be going deliberately unnoticed and unreported."

Another teacher tweeted: "In my year 2 class this week I had 3 children off with chicken pox and 5 off with Covid. Since September last year there have been 2 days when I have had every single member of my 30 strong class in school. Yes - 2 days!"

One tweet read, in relation to the pandemic, "It's NOT over. It's worse than ever. It's hammering schools. After 2 years this is unsustainable. We can't live with it when it's making people too unwell to learn and work. How the hell can we be expected to operate an education system of any quality as things are?"

A sufferer with Long COVID, who is campaigning for awareness of the condition, said, "Still waiting for vaccines for the under 12s in England… government has removed all covid measures, free testing gone soon as well. Schools are Covid swamps, kids and teachers off sick. It's carnage".

Schools Week reported last week the failure of the government's criminally irresponsible plan to plug the staffing gap with retired teachers. The Department for Education refused to publicise figures for the number of ex-staff who actually returned to the classroom.

A school leader tweeted, "I've held (virtual) meetings with staff all week in my school and others. The stress levels are stratospheric. The tears are common place. My friend with 30yrs teaching experience has quit EYs [Early Years] to work for National Trust. Unfilled HT [headteacher] and DHT [deputy headteacher] vacancies, schools on rolling closures."

Another headteacher wrote, "All this talk of stopping testing and learning to live with it [the virus] ignores the fact that my staff with it are too ill to be at work and too many off at once. What am I supposed to staff my (infant) school with?"

The main responsibility for this worsening crisis lies with the education trade unions. They have worked hand in glove with the government throughout the pandemic to ensure that unsafe schools have, with a few months' exception, remained open.

One recent tweet from a teacher read, "It's shocking-

I've tweeted the union so much about SATS [academic tests] going ahead and nothing! No one is doing anything! As for the supply budget [for temporary staff] that's when you can actually get a supply as they're all stacked!"

As a result of the unions' suppressing teacher and parent action to close schools which serve as a major vector for the spread of COVID-19, well over three million children have been recorded infected. The virus has killed 158 children and at least 570 staff. Hundreds of thousands have or are suffering Long COVID.

Nothing will move the education unions to mobilise their hundreds of thousands of members in opposition. In response to the latest ONS figures, Kevin Courtney, joint general secretary of the National Education Union (NEU) said, "Today's survey shows the percentage of primary/nursery-aged children with Covid-19 has risen significantly in just a week, from 4% to 6.3%. This now equates to two infected pupils in every primary class on average…"

He made no call for COVID infested schools to be closed, quite the opposite, arguing, "If Boris Johnson wants us to 'live with Covid-19' then he must make it viable for schools and colleges to do so." The NEU leader appealed to the government to reintroduce a few, albeit limited, safety measures in schools, and to "stop burying its head in the sand on ventilation and fund a nationwide programme of support to ensure no classroom fails to get the monitoring, air filtration, training, or building improvements required"—pleas he knows will fall on deaf ears.

To fight against the pandemic, educators and parents are invited to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK). The Committee's Twitter page can be followed here.

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