

UK teacher speaks to WSWS about ongoing COVID surge in schools

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Governments throughout the world are ignoring the ongoing COVID pandemic, despite millions of people continuing to be infected, and thousands dying from the virus each month.

Since its spread is no longer officially monitored, it is only thanks to the efforts of principled scientists, who track levels of SARS-CoV-2 in wastewater collection samples, that its prevalence can be estimated.

Based on data collected by Biobot Analytics in particular, since the emergence of the JN.1 variant in August approximately 1-2 billion people globally have been infected with the virus—and tens of millions will go on to develop Long COVID.

The Economist estimates there have been approaching 30 million excess global deaths up to the end of 2023, compared to the pre-pandemic period.

Governments pretend the virus has disappeared, part of efforts to normalise mass infection and justify the abandonment of all public health precautions. But everyday experience for millions of people conflicts with the official whitewash.

Lisa Diaz, a campaigner for safe education in UK schools during the pandemic, posted on X her continuing concerns after being contacted by teachers reporting high staff and pupil absences due to COVID.

Many responses to Lisa's posting confirmed that transmission rates remain high due to the absence of mitigation measures to slow the virus's spread. An experienced primary school teacher from Cambridgeshire in England, who responded to Lisa's tweet, gave the following interview to the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS). To protect her anonymity, she is referred to as Barbara.

WSWS: What mitigation measures if any are in place in your school?

Barbara: We have hand gel in all classrooms. Teachers can refill them. I don't think they're used quite as much as they were, but certainly the children in my class use them after blowing their nose as standard. There are still hand sprays on the walls in various places for adults to use around the school, but they're not all refilled. There are no HEPA filters or UV lighting provided by school. People don't mask.

Each classroom has a CO2 monitor. I still use mine and keep the CO2 levels really low, but I'm not sure anyone else does. Windows in other rooms are generally kept shut.

WSWS: What makes you think COVID is still spreading? What are staff/pupil absences like compared to the pre-COVID period?

Barbara: I don't have figures, but absence rates are higher than they used to be, in line with the national picture. Staff with access to the data said that staff absence has increased in the same way pupil absence has.

It's become more difficult to get a supply teacher and the deputy head has spent a large proportion of his time covering for sick teachers. The headteacher was very rarely off prior to her COVID infection, not even once a year on average. Since her first [infection] she's been off quite often and for several days at a time. I've been ill more often too and have had several periods of making it through the week to then be too ill/too exhausted to enjoy the weekend. Other colleagues report the same.

I don't know anyone [pupils] off with Long COVID, but I do notice the dark shadows under some children's eyes, and how more children are sick more often... It really does seem to be illness driving the increase in absence.

WSWS: When staff or pupils are off sick, does anyone mention COVID? Does anyone do a rapid flow test?

Barbara: Staff do test for COVID reasonably often but not as a matter of course and it's optional. The headteacher recently was off with COVID and then another member of staff tested herself because she had symptoms and found she was positive.

Barbara said she had heard that after a headteachers' cluster meeting in Cambridgeshire, six heads were off work the following week with COVID. One teacher at her school also caught the virus but returned after four-and-a-half days of testing positive.

Barbara: I expressed surprise she had tested negative so quickly and she said she'd been told she could come back if she felt well enough. Then we were all expected to sit together in the same room for a meeting after school with someone who might still be COVID positive. That is following the guidelines. I think this recent case shows the madness!

Government guidelines state that "it is not recommended that children and young people are tested for COVID-19 unless directed to by a health professional:

"For children and young people aged 18 and under who are recommended to take a COVID-19 test by a health professional and test positive, the advice is to try to stay at home and avoid contact with other people for three days..."

"Adults are no longer required to do a COVID-19 rapid lateral flow test if they have symptoms. Adults with a positive COVID-19 test result are advised to try to stay at home and avoid contact with other people for five days."

WSWS: What is your opinion of the guidelines, in relation to the disease being allowed to spread and mutate?

Barbara: It's terrifying that we're allowing this to happen. Every piece of research I see about COVID underlines the fact that this is not a cold, it's a multi-system vascular disease and is causing all kinds of damage to our brains and bodies.

One member of staff has been off with Long COVID. She's back now but was off for about three months. She also had quite a long period where she didn't teach her full timetable. Everyone's noticed the increase in sickness. People do mostly seem to think it's COVID-related but don't seem to see any way out of it.

WSWS: Have you any idea what the situation is like in other schools? Is it discussed anywhere?

Barbara: It doesn't seem to be discussed much. I'm in an NEU [National Education Union] reps' group and don't think it's mentioned there.

I'm so disappointed in the NEU. I actually voted for [new general secretary] Daniel Kebede on the basis that I saw a tweet from him about clean air in school but have heard nothing since he's been elected.

I recently attended the Cambridgeshire [NEU] meeting where we voted on motions to take to conference and there were several about clean air/COVID transmission. It didn't get through from our region. Unfortunately, there was no time for discussion!

I was all ready to try to persuade people that this was an issue for the left, about our and children's safety etc, but we didn't get a chance to say why we voted for particular motions. I'm not going to conference. I just can't justify going to a conference with a group of people I know are highly likely to have COVID. I put myself at enough risk every day at school.

WSWS: The World Health Organization said at the beginning of the year that COVID is still rampant. Why do you think governments all over the world are ignoring this and doing nothing to prevent the spread?

Barbara: It's all about valuing the economy over people. Of course, the economy can't exist without people, as Germany's recent data caused by increased sick days shows. I can't comprehend how it can be allowed happen, but I can see it's how capitalism works.

[Of the ruling Conservatives and opposition Labour party:] I'm disgusted and deeply disappointed in them.

WSWS: How is your school affected by the crisis in teacher recruitment and retention and funding. What impact is COVID having on this?

Barbara: I do think COVID has affected supply cover [for staff absences].

In our immediate area there are four primary schools and at the end of the last school year, there were seven vacancies—a whole school-worth of teachers! I don't think they had a single application for posts by the closing date. I can't imagine that all the other six vacancies in the area were filled.

We have had trouble filling Teaching Assistant [TA] posts, but as funding is a huge issue, there isn't really the money to pay them.

Lack of SEND [special educational needs and disabilities] support is a massive problem. We have lost TAs because we have

had a huge increase in children with severe SEN and so TAs who were previously general class TAs have been put 1:1 with a child with high needs. The high responsibility and low pay have meant that they have gone to do less stressful jobs elsewhere.

All the teachers feel their job is getting more difficult.

WSWS: The *World Socialist Web Site* has outlined three strategies in relation to COVID: herd immunity, which most political parties have embraced now, mitigation, which was adopted during lockdown, and global eradication, which our party is fighting for as part of the struggle to overthrow the capitalist profit system and establish socialism. What are your thoughts on this?

Barbara: I would love global eradication to be a possibility. It seems like the only reasonable and equitable thing to aim for given the serious nature of COVID. However, we could quickly improve matters greatly by using HEPA filters, masking in healthcare and public transport, requiring regular testing and supporting people to isolate when they are sick. I read that Thailand have a system where all school children test every Monday. It can be done.

WSWS: Is there anything you would like to add?

Barbara: I think it's important that teachers have not been eligible for vaccinations in the same way healthcare workers are. Clearly, those working in hospitals or doctors' surgeries should be front of the queue, but it's not just those who have been vaccinated first. My partner works in NHS social care and mostly works from home between face-to-face meetings with clients. He has always been fully vaccinated while I have not.

It's a scandal that doses of the vaccine were thrown away rather than offered more widely this winter and also that school staff, who have had very high rates of COVID infections, have not been offered the vaccine.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee invites teaching and support staff to contact us with your experiences of COVID in schools.

To fight for the hundreds of billions of pounds required for high quality education, health and social care—not corporate profits and military spending—join the fight for socialism today.



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