



Analysis: Covid absence rate higher for school support staff than teachers

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Vaccine access must be ‘urgent priority’ as official figures show 33,000 support staff workers absent due to covid in December

GMB, the union for school support staff, has called for urgent occupational priority for vaccination for school workers as new figures show that more support staff workers were more likely to be absent from work due to covid-19 than teachers.

The figures, which cover schools in England only, were published by the Department for Education (DfE) this week.

A total of 33,267 school support staff workers were absent on 17 December 17, 2020 for covid-19 related reasons, including confirmed and suspected infections and those who were required to isolate due to exposure inside or outside school.

“ **Support staff are the highly skilled professionals of the education system but too often they are ignored in public debate. Ministers across Government need to wake up and recognise the reality that hundreds of thousands of low-paid school workers are at high risk of infection**”

Rehana Azam, GMB National Secretary



GMB said that support staff workers were at the highest occupational exposure to Covid-19 in schools, as common tasks include administration of medicine, supporting children one to one, food and, personal care together with close pupil contact whilst supporting learning.

An estimated 6.1 per cent of school support staff were absent on December 17 due to Covid-19. This compared to 4.4 per cent of teachers and school leaders. Covid-19 absences have been higher for support staff than teachers on every day recorded by the DfE (since 12 October 2020).

The disparity was even greater in Special Schools, where 16.2 per cent of support staff were absent on December 17 for reasons linked to covid-19 (compared to 5.4 per cent of teachers and school leaders).

The DfE has said that it believes that teachers and support staff should receive occupational priority for phase two of the vaccination programme.

However, no official decision has been made, and Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation advice on occupational prioritisation only mentions teachers.

“ Halfon: "Why not ensure that teachers and support staff are a priority for vaccination?"

Williamson says it's "understandably right" government is prioritising those most at risk, but in next wave, "I see the top priority is for all those who work in schools" #edselctte

— Schools Week (@SchoolsWeek) January 13, 2021

GMB is campaigning for all school workers to have access to vaccination.

Rehana Azam, GMB National Secretary, said:

“Schools cannot function without support staff, and these figures confirm that these critical workers are not getting the support they deserve.

“It is not a coincidence that whilst many teachers are teaching remotely from home, lots of GMB members remain in schools, supervising classes, preparing food and maintaining school buildings.

“Many of our members are performing tasks that involve a high risk of transmission, without adequate PPE, and often in poorly ventilated buildings.

“Support staff are the highly skilled professionals of the education system but too often they are ignored in public debate.



“The comments from Deputy Chief Medical Officer Jenny Harries to Parliament yesterday did not reflect at all the reality on the ground.

“The DFE’s own statistics prove this. Ministers across Government need to wake up and recognise the reality that hundreds of thousands of low-paid school workers are at high risk of infection, with devastating consequence for workers, pupils and the wider community.”

“The reality is that without urgent priority access to vaccinations for school support staff, the cycle of community transmission in schools will not be broken.”

