



Masks still needed in school as 154,000 children & staff with long covid

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20 scientists and public health experts join with unions, and 400 parents and students to urge Government to ensure children are adequately protected in schools to prevent another COVID-19 wave

A coalition of nearly 20 scientists join with educational unions, including NEU, UNITE, UNISON, GMB, NASUWT, and 400 parents, and students have written to Education Secretary Gavin Williamson to express concern at reported Government plans to stop requiring children to wear face coverings in secondary school classrooms in England from 17th May.

- Letter to Government warns 153,000 children and school staff in the UK could already be suffering with Long COVID
- This includes 43,000 children and 114,000 teaching and education staff
- Real figures could be higher as current data does not account for full range of Long COVID symptoms
- Survey data of educational staff confirms high adherence to mask use among children
- Reported Government plans to lift mask use from 17th May risks accelerating outbreaks of variants of concern, which could spark a new wave requiring more prolonged lockdowns

“To strip these necessary protections, when there are already too few mitigation measures in schools, and when rates of Covid-19 are still significant would have consequences for the health of our children and their parents as well as their communities,”



warns the letter signed by 20 leading scientists and public health experts from the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, Exeter, UCL, Queen Mary University of London among top British scientific institutions.

The letter points to recent ONS data confirming a marked rise in infections over March among children after schools opened for just a few weeks before the Easter Break.

It points out that according to the latest data, between 10-13% of children who are infected with COVID-19 develop persistent symptoms after infection lasting 5 weeks or more, an indication of 'Long COVID'.

Experimental estimates from the ONS now suggest that as many 43,000 children and 110,000 educational staff in the UK could now be living with Long COVID, warns the letter also signed by a former Public Health England pandemic expert.

While these figures are uncertain and more research is needed as Long COVID remains poorly understood, these figures could severely underestimate the real extent of Long COVID because the current data only tracks 12 potential symptoms when there are in fact over 30 recognised symptoms.

The letter, which has also been signed by several parents' groups and education unions as well as hundreds of parents and students, warns that increasing infection among children puts household members, parents and the wider community at risk, with parents of children attending schools already found to be at higher risk of infection and hospitalisation.

Recent weeks have seen several outbreaks of concerning variants within schools, further questioning the wisdom of removing mitigations from classrooms.

Catherine Wilson, Head of support, Parents United UK

"The removal of masks for secondary school pupils contradicts the available health and safety information we have regarding COVID-19 and threatens to increase the volume of COVID-19 infections in our un-vaccinated children and young people, in addition to school staff and families."

Mask wearing is practiced widely in both primary and secondary school classrooms in most countries in Europe, US and South East Asia, notes the letter, citing recent survey research of nearly 8,000 UK educational staff showing overwhelming support for mask use, and high adherence among children.

Current rates of vaccination in the UK are not sufficient to fully mitigate the impact of transmission among children on infection rates in the community, warns the letter. It notes that countries like Israel emerged fully from lockdown after fully vaccinating over 80% of adults, while re-opening schools with mitigations including classroom mask mandates still in place.

Co-signatory epidemiologist Dr Deepti Gurdasani of the Queen Mary University of London



“Scientists, school staff, parents and students are alarmed. We do not want a repeat of past mistakes that previously led to new waves, higher deaths, and prolonged lockdowns.

“That’s why we’ve come together to urge the Government to consider the global and national evidence on current infection rates in schools. Face coverings should be continued in schools after the 17th May, with review prior to the next stage of the roadmap on the 21st June, to avoid the risk of new outbreaks.”

