

Amid pandemic surge in school-aged children

Chicago Public Schools unveils reopening plan

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The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) reopening plan unveiled last month by Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the CPS and public health officials will result in the needless deaths of more Illinois teachers, students and their family members if it is not opposed. Teachers must fight this completely unscientific plan and ensure that schools remain closed until vaccines are widely available and the pandemic is contained.

The Democratic Party is taking the lead nationally on the back-to-work campaign, which depends upon the unsafe reopening of the schools. The trillions added to the balance sheet of the Federal Reserve to stave off the financial collapse that erupted in mid-March can only be repaid through the intense exploitation of the working class.

In New York City's reopening plan announced Sunday by Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio, the primary motive is clearly not concern for students' education or well-being, as city officials have cynically claimed, but rather to provide the basis for getting parents back to work.

The same motives are driving Lightfoot and the CPS, whose school reopening plan aims to bring back primarily those students under the age of 14, who cannot legally be left alone in Illinois without supervision, while leaving high school students to learn remotely. The current plan calls for students in Pre-K and those in moderate and intensive special education cluster programs to return to class January 11, while students in grades K-8 are scheduled to be back in school February 1.

The drive to reopen Chicago schools coincides with the intensifying spread of the pandemic throughout the Midwest. Chicago hospitals are filled with COVID-19 patients, 279 of whom are in intensive-care units, of whom 159 are on ventilators. Chicago's current positivity rate is 11.6 percent, and over the past week the city has been averaging 1,723 cases per day.

The positivity rate and daily new infection figures have nearly tripled since Illinois Democratic Governor J.B.

Pritzker issued his July 24 executive order allowing school districts to make their own reopening decisions for the fall, regardless of the state's own thresholds for phased reopening and despite the state having reverted to more strict mitigation measures since the order was issued. The state of Illinois was also recently discovered to be tracking workplace outbreaks but keeping this critical information hidden from the public.

According to figures from the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), eight people under the age of 20 have died from COVID-19 in Illinois, including a 12-year-old, Ernesto Guzman. Bringing children together in a school setting also raises the risk of infections and deaths among their family members, as well as among teachers and their families.

Late last month, Mike Padron, a 38-year-old teacher from the Rockford area who worked at the Boone-Winnebago County School District's alternative school, Summit Academy, died of COVID-19. Mike's wife Nikki, also a teacher in Rockford, received a COVID-19 diagnosis as well, according to media reports from family members. She released a statement to the *Rockford Register Star*, saying, "I lost my husband yesterday. ... His death is a tragic loss to his family, friends and the students he served."

In September, the CPS acknowledged eight deaths among school workers and 250 positive cases, likely only a fraction of the true number of deaths among school staff.

Because of the deadly reality of the pandemic, the CPS and school districts around the country have peddled the fiction that it is possible to reopen schools safely. A key part of this effort is the assertion that children do not easily transmit the disease and that when children do contract the disease, they are unlikely to become very sick or die.

In this, the needs of the financial aristocracy have been articulated by the pliant and willing media, including the *Chicago Sun-Times*, partly owned by the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL). In a November 5 editorial statement, the

Sun-Times claimed that the example of local Catholic schools proved the wisdom of reopening for in-person learning.

In fact, according to the extremely limited data being tracked by the IDPH, there are currently 16 ongoing school outbreaks statewide and 7,765 cases registered among school-aged children in just the past week. The week prior, before the Thanksgiving holiday, there were 15,062 cases. Additionally, the IDPH has registered nearly 105,000 COVID-19 cases among people under the age of 20, around 14 percent of total cases.

Earlier this month, *Chalkbeat* reported on a freedom of information request from the Chicago Department of Public Health, which revealed the city had tracked 267 cases in child-care centers and 207 in private and charter schools, mostly among adults that work in the schools. Notably, the reporting period for this data was April 1 through mid-October, before the effects of more widespread reopening would be registered.

In fact, numerous recent studies suggest children are as infectious as adults, with similar or even higher detectable viral loads. As reported by Dr. Zoë Hyde in an article in the *Medical Journal of Australia*, studies around the world suggest children can readily become infected and infect others. She notes, “Investigation of children has frequently been poor, with insufficient testing performed. Additionally, most studies of COVID-19 and children have been conducted during lock-down periods—which are not normal conditions—or at a time of low community transmission.”

Many parents are already deeply skeptical of CPS claims. Surveys conducted by the district over the summer, when positivity rates were much lower, indicated that only 28.1 percent of elementary school parents said they planned to bring their children back to school in the fall if they reopened, and 40.8 percent said they would not, with the balance unsure.

Because of the opposition to in-person learning among families, the CPS’s reopening plan touts various measures to supposedly mitigate the spread of the disease within schools. For the most part, this is pure theater. Few teachers, students or parents believe that a school district that failed to provide the most basic maintenance and hygiene before the pandemic is somehow capable of providing aggressive disease prevention now.

There is a daily requirement for students to report whether or not they are feeling any symptoms. But without tests, given the incubation period and the prevalence of asymptomatic spread among youth, this is meaningless. Masking and social distancing measures are undermined by the fact of airborne transmission and students staying in the same room for extended periods of time.

While the CPS has claimed to provide a portable air purifier for every classroom, the air quality assessments they conduct are completely inadequate, with no indication the machines can actually carry out the minimum number of air changes per hour recommended by aerosol experts and scientists. In fact, a study from Technical University Berlin suggests aerosol concentration in a classroom is reached within two minutes after an infected individual coughs, as shown in this video.

Any claim the school reopenings are being conducted to keep students from falling behind is undermined by the fact that teachers will be required to teach students in-person and remotely at the same time. Such an approach is pedagogically the worst of both worlds and cannot be carried out at a high level, especially since teachers have received little in the way of training, staff support and technology.

Despite the strong support among parents and the vast majority of workers for COVID-19 prevention, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has ruled out opposing the CPS reopening plans. At a union House of Delegates meeting in November, CTU President Jesse Sharkey, a former leading member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization, said, “If we keep saying no, it can leave us isolated, and our members will be demoralized, because it would appear we are not bargaining and we keep saying no.”

In other words, they intend to say yes, and will work with Lightfoot to attempt to prevent any organized opposition from emerging. For that reason, it is of the utmost importance for educators to begin organizing themselves and form rank-and-file safety committees independently of the union, in order to lead the fight not only for their own lives, but on behalf of the working class as a whole. Parents likewise should reject in-person learning and insist on a vast expansion of technology and other learning supports for remote learning, and full income protection so that they can safely stay home to assist their children.

The Socialist Equality Party stands ready to assist CPS teachers, students and parents in this struggle. Contact us today to begin the process of forming a rank-and-file safety committee in Chicago!



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