

Reopening of Boston colleges threatens escalation of COVID-19 crisis

Andrew Timon
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In the state of Massachusetts the average number of daily COVID-19 cases is trending near 5,000. Not a single day has passed since November in which new daily case numbers have been below those seen during the highest peaks of the first April surge.

Despite the harrowing state of the pandemic in the state and throughout the country, colleges and universities in Boston and the surrounding area are pushing to reopen schools for in-person learning in the 2021 semester. The impact of college reopenings will have a devastating impact on the region. In particular, Boston comprises 10 percent of the state's total population and more than a third of the state's total college enrollment.

Remarkably, even schools considered the apogee of scientific work and study, such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), are pushing to bring back more students than last semester. A Northeastern University statement announces: "The university is now open. Students are on campus, classes are in session, residence halls are occupied, and business offices are open."

At Boston College (BC), classes resumed January 28. The university will continue as it did last semester with "symptomatic and targeted asymptomatic testing for all BC community members throughout the second semester."

Boston University (BU), which has experienced a spike in the on-campus positive test rate for COVID-19 in recent weeks, is expecting more students to return to campus this semester than in the fall.

These reopenings come despite the fact that there is no way for schools to operate safely for in-person learning under the current conditions. The lessons of the fall semester, along with all the recent scientific evidence, demonstrate that reopening schools will lead to a sharp increase in community spread, hospitalizations and death.

Schools such as MIT, BU, BC and Northeastern have

boasted low positivity rates as proof that their efforts to contain the spread within their campuses have been successful. However, an examination of the number of positive cases in relation to the number of students and faculty being tested shows a student-to-population positivity ratio at or above that of Massachusetts residents-to-population size.

If one takes BC as an example, between August 16 and November 15, 275 of approximately 9,370 undergrads tested positive for COVID-19, or nearly 3 percent of the campus population. Three percent of 6.8 million, the population of Massachusetts, would equal 200,000 cases in this three-month span. But during this same period the state saw 72,869 cases, with a majority of these cases in October and November, making BC's number of cases per population near triple that of the state. BC and other universities falsely cite their far lower positivity rates in comparison to the state as proof of the efficacy of their safety measures.

The real source of the positivity rate at the schools is not due to lower numbers of cases but higher number of tests given. The universities are drastically outtesting the state. With these deceptive statistics showing low positivity rates, schools are not demonstrating a scientific basis for safe reopening but their financial interests in keeping schools filled with students.

Such lies can have enormous ramifications for the public at large—beyond city, state and country lines. A study by the Broad Institute of Harvard and MIT shows how superspreader events and large outbreaks of cases, like those at BC during the October-November period during which 73 students tested positive within a week, can lead to untold thousands of cases across the globe.

Genetic sequencing of the virus responsible for the Biogen corporate conference superspreader held in February 2020 in Boston revealed that what was originally thought to have been only 100 cases directly

associated with the event, had led to approximately 300,000 cases by November 1, primarily in Massachusetts and Florida but also spreading to numerous countries around the world.

The study reports: “[F]indings highlight the close relationships between seemingly disconnected groups and populations: viruses from international business travel seeded major outbreaks among individuals experiencing homelessness, spread throughout the Boston area including to other higher risk communities, and were exported to other domestic and international sites.”

Allowing outbreaks to occur at universities has immense consequences. The study also found: “While superspreading events among medically vulnerable populations, such as nursing home residents, have a larger immediate impact on mortality, our findings raise the possibility that—paradoxically—the implications may be greater, when measured as a cost to society, for superspreading events that involve younger, healthier and more mobile populations because of the increased risk of subsequent transmission.”

Many studies have shown similar results. Two large-scale, population-based swabbing studies in the UK where households or individuals were randomly selected to test for the presence of SARS-CoV-2 showed that since September, when schools, universities and colleges were fully opened, the highest rates of infection had been observed in young adults (about 18–25 years old). The next highest prevalence was observed in secondary school children (11–18 years old), suggesting that they are likely to be an important source of infection to peers and others, while primary school children (5–11 years old) have been found to have an infection prevalence comparable to that of working-aged adults.

Similarly, modeling analyses based on data from the UK Office for National Statistics’ COVID-19 infection survey found that secondary school-aged children are nearly eight times more likely to introduce an infection to a household than adults. When the sample data is restricted to data only up to September, when secondary schools were predominantly closed, that probability was only marginally higher than that of adults.

These are just a small sample of studies showing a scientific reality opposite to what schools, governments and President Biden claim: that schools can be reopened safely. Authorities are doubling down on these false claims even as more virulent mutations of the virus are beginning to emerge and spread uncontrolled. It is not a theoretical hypothesis but common sense, that schools

will be incubators and propagation centers for these new, more infectious deadly strains of COVID-19 to reach deep into communities with untold consequences.

Boston universities, such as MIT and Harvard, have already been falsely cited and weaponized as examples of how schools can be reopened “safely.” Washington state Governor Jay Inslee issued a paltry \$3 million in December for health and safety protocols for schools in an effort to force them to open, citing “dramatic drops in risk of infection transmission when safety measures are in place” at colleges like MIT and Harvard.

Students and teachers must oppose efforts to distort science in an effort to foster illusions that schools can open safely—as long as masks are worn, six feet of distancing is maintained, and hand washing occurs. The reality is that schools are vectors of COVID-19 transmission and must be closed to stop the spread of the virus and save lives.

An outbreak in a school affects workers in every workplace and industry. Emergency action must be taken for the immediate shutdown of all schools, universities and nonessential production. The resources that were funneled into the coffers of Wall Street by the CARES Act and the over \$1 trillion in wealth accumulated by the richest billionaires since the start of the pandemic must be expropriated to pay for these measures, as well as to dramatically increase testing, contact tracing, health care services, and vaccine production and distribution.

Rank-and-file health and safety committees must be built to fight for these policies in schools, industries and communities. Contact us today to help organize and implement these policies and make the decision to join and build the Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact