

# Omaha Public Schools pushes for fully in-person learning despite widespread opposition

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As COVID-19 test positivity rates in Omaha, Nebraska hit over 25 percent and deaths approach 600, Omaha Public Schools (OPS) Superintendent Dr. Cheryl Logan recently announced that schools will resume fully in-person learning this month.

OPS is Nebraska's largest school district, with over 50,000 students. A smaller school district adjacent to Omaha, Ralston Public Schools (RPS), will resume fully in-person schooling this month. These moves force educators and students into deadly working conditions coincides with the news that Nebraska's teachers are not likely to get vaccines until as late as April, according to WOWT 6 News.

OPS was remote at the beginning of the semester in August, but since September the district has been following a hybrid model. Groups of students come to school based on their last names, with Wednesday being an alternating day for the two halves of the alphabet. The model is not based on numbers of students, so if the first or second half have an especially large number of students, this is not taken into consideration.

The district began its second semester virtually and went back to this hybrid model on January 19. Within the first two weeks of this semester, the dashboard of COVID-19 cases on the OPS website reported 38 staff and 60 students with active cases, and 110 staff and 354 students in quarantine. This only accounts for the cases that get reported and documented and is likely a significant undercount.

In the 2020 fall semester, COVID-19 outbreaks were severe enough to temporarily shut down multiple schools. The *Omaha World Herald* reported that at least three of OPS' schools had to close due to major outbreaks. As a district, OPS serves some of the poorest and most vulnerable students in the city, with 75

percent receiving free or reduced lunch.

RPS followed a similar hybrid model, but the *Omaha World Herald* reports that Superintendent Mark Adler wrote to parents that the district "decided to return to full classroom learning for several reasons, among them to improve upon student academic performance and growth."

The reopening of Omaha and Ralston schools has been pushed forward despite enormous opposition and protests from students and teachers since last summer, including some who put together an open letter and a petition clearly stating the dangers posed.

In the open letter, which has been signed by hundreds of students and educators, they note the long-term damage of COVID-19 and concerns for educators' and students' safety. One of the student signatories, senior Micah Gilbert, states, "I've thought about the school districts' plans to reopen school and what the results may be. There's a simple fact that I don't really think I had internalized until today: Teachers will die."

One teacher says in the letter, "I miss my kids. I miss my classroom. I miss my colleagues. But going back to school puts my kids, my colleagues, and myself at risk. I am immunocompromised, and I'm scared I'm going to die. In preparation for my return to school, I have filled out a Living Will as well as a Medical Power of Attorney. These things should not be on my 'Back to School' list... We are teachers, not martyrs."

The petition by students and teachers has over 3,400 signatures. The letter and petition were released in August, before the schools opened for the hybrid model and before a vaccine was on the horizon. Since then, the test positivity rate has increased precipitously. In the neighboring school district of Millard, which has implemented fully in-person learning since the beginning of the school year, one custodian lost his life

to COVID-19.

A similar petition has been created more recently by students in Ralston, with 200 signatures and growing. The students rightly state, “In this current climate, the vaccine will be a form of protection from the virus and is the first step to eliminate the spread of COVID-19. However, you must be 16 and older or are considered high risk making eligibility for the vaccine a very small proportion of the student body. To make matters worse, new strains of the virus have been found across the country.”

Much like the Millard school district, many of Nebraska’s school districts have been fully in-person for several months. A student in one of those districts, Sky, was interviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site* recently. Sky commented, “I had COVID-19. I got it from being in school because I haven’t gone anywhere else. It’s hard to feel safe. Students are out with COVID all the time. The administration has only done the bare minimum. They separated some of the lunch tables and masks were optional. Only students with serious medical conditions are online. The administration is claiming that it’s safer to be in school because they can supervise mask wearing. It’s misleading and it’s dangerous.”

The huge spike in cases in Nebraska came within two months of schools reopening, with cases reaching an all-time high in November of 3,340 in one day.

Nebraska’s Republican Governor Pete Ricketts has said from the beginning of the pandemic that his concern is not the lives and safety of workers in Nebraska, but rather hospitals hitting capacity. His thinly veiled disregard is par for the course and the *Omaha World Herald* reports that he is pushing spending cuts for schools in the midst of the pandemic.

The drive to fully reopen schools in Nebraska follows the same pattern seen throughout the US and internationally. In Chicago, educators are currently in a direct conflict with the Democratic Party and the Biden administration, which aim to send teachers and workers back to work as the pandemic rages across the country.

There is enormous opposition among rank-and-file educators in Chicago and across the country to such policies. In contrast, the teachers unions are brokering unsafe school reopenings, including the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education

Association (NEA).

The teachers unions in Omaha and across Nebraska have done nothing to protect teachers or other school staff. In November, the Omaha Education Association (OEA) pleaded for the governor to pass a mask mandate, and more recently they issued a statement that teachers should be vaccinated before entering the classrooms, but they have issued no calls for collective actions or strikes.

Commenting on this lack of support from the local unions in Nebraska, including the Lincoln Education Association (LEA) and the Nebraska State Education Association (NSEA), a teacher wrote on Facebook, “It’s terrible how teachers are being treated and our lack of support from LEA or NESA. There is no priority for teachers.”

Scientific studies prove that vaccinations for teachers alone are not sufficient to prevent the spread of the virus, as children can transmit the virus asymptotically, especially with new mutations of the virus that are less effectively treated by the vaccines. The science on the dangers of reopening schools is clear and yet educators across the US and all over the world are being told they need to go back into unsafe classrooms “for the children.”

The only way to fight back is for Nebraska educators and parents to follow the lead of teachers across the globe and form educators rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions and both big business parties, in order to organize for their safety and the safety of the entire community. Sign up to learn more today.



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