

Chicago elementary teachers begin returning to classrooms under near-total media blackout

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The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is independent of the CTU and Democratic Party and aims to unite educators, parents, students and the broader working class to prepare strike action to close all schools and non-essential workplaces. We call on all Chicago educators, parents and students to join our committee.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teachers for kindergarten through fifth grades began returning to schools on Monday, a consequence of the sellout agreement the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) concluded with the district. With their students scheduled to return next week, the danger facing teachers and other workers is likely to escalate further as new variants of the COVID-19 virus are provided ample opportunities to infect new hosts. According to the Illinois Department of Public Health contact tracing data, schools have become the number one potential exposure locations, overtaking all other categories.

Following the “phased reopening” plan agreed to between the CPS and CTU leaders, an estimated 67,000 students and thousands of teachers and staff involved in classes up to eighth grade are scheduled to return to classrooms in stages between now and March 8, with the large group of K-5 students due back on March 1.

The sharp conflict between the Chicago teachers against Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot took center stage in the resistance by educators to President Biden’s back-to-school drive across the country. Despite that, the return of many elementary teachers to classrooms has been met with a near-total media blackout about the conditions inside the schools.

One of the only media outlets reporting anything at all about teachers’ return, television station WGN,

managed less than 100 words on the topic. Its short article was published just as the school day began and included no reporting on whether CPS safety protocols were in place or being followed.

Even on Twitter, many local education reporters turned their attention to other topics. While several had previously been closely reporting the number of teachers refusing to go into unsafe classrooms as well as public opposition to CPS’s plans, reporting has noticeably shifted toward coverage of students’ “learning loss” and opposition to testing.

This is largely in line with the shift in emphasis on the part of the CTU itself. First, the CTU used the death of former union President Karen Lewis to drown out criticism and exposure of betrayal of teachers, which was carefully engineered with the national American Federation of Teachers leadership. Since then, the union and its supporters in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left organizations have sought to shift attention toward the hunger strike over the relocation of the General Iron recycling plant, while only half-heartedly promoting #CPSSickOut, a parent-led student sickout scheduled for March 1.

Even as the media and union downplay these events, social media posts from teachers indicate conditions at schools are far from safe. Educators have reported encountering administration and building security staff who were not masked, raising questions about how to report such obvious violations of the already minimal protocols. The bogus union-management “health and safety committees” established in the latest agreement between CPS and CTU have not materialized, and it is entirely unclear to many educators where to turn with safety problems and questions.

It was virtually impossible to keep classrooms clean even before the pandemic, one teacher told the WSWS. “Before we went remote, cleanliness was a major issue. I am in a pre-K classroom, so it can get messy. I would clean the surface areas, pick up the chairs, etc., and when I would come in the morning the same dirt and mess would still be on the floor. I often had to call in the morning for soap and paper towels.”

The teacher pointed to the difficulties enforcing COVID-19 safety protocols, particularly on very young students. “Young children, especially in Pre-K, struggle with social distancing in normal conditions. It actually goes against all the developmentally appropriate practices for Pre-K. They are meant to socialize and learn how to understand personal space and appropriate touch. The way preschool classrooms are set up is all for collaborative play. They also are still learning life skills, like how to button, zip, wipe and blow their noses, put on shoes.”

Educators are also reporting that the district is sending them affidavits to sign concerning their vaccination status whose purpose is to ascertain who has been vaccinated, so the district can send educators back into classrooms even though they had been previously exempted due to health accommodations.

Even with the already evident problems with elementary schools, city leaders are committed to forcing high school teachers and students back into classrooms, even though it is widely acknowledged that high school age students get sick and transmit COVID-19 at similar rates for young adults.

Soon after the ink was dry on the agreement for in-person elementary schools, CPS CEO Janice Jackson said, “The first thing I want people to know is that our high school students returning to school is the top priority.” Her position is bolstered by the reopening agreement itself, which mandates that the district and union form a “Joint Task Force to address high school reopening issues.”

It was reiterated in a February 14 interview with Lightfoot in the *New York Times*, in which she said, “I’m very focused on reopening high schools. High schools are more complicated, as you can imagine. Elementary schools can have the students in a pod stay static and have the teachers move. It is much more challenging to do that in a high school setting.”

Perhaps most absurdly, in light of the fact that half a

million people have died from COVID-19 in the United States alone, Lightfoot said, “I want to see, in particular, seniors be able to come back together this year, so they have something of a normal senior year experience.”

Even though Lightfoot refuses to acknowledge the danger to students and their families, not to mention teachers, she again appealed to the fact that Catholic and other private schools in Chicago have remained open, completely misrepresenting this dangerous decision as safe. As she put it, “There’s a lot that we can learn from their experience.”

In fact, Catholic and private schools are among 14 schools the Illinois Department of Public Health has been forced to recognize as having ongoing COVID-19 outbreaks. Aside from these outbreaks, which are only acknowledged when there are five or more cases at one school that can be attributed via contact tracing, there are a further 1,074 schools that have been listed as potential exposure locations within the last 30 days.

Other districts, which up to now had maintained remote learning, are now also moving to implement some level of in-person learning. One of the most notable making this shift is Joliet District 86, which ordered all staff back into school buildings, regardless of health status or risks to family members.

Chicago educators interested in fighting the reopening plans at CPS and other area school districts should join the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and email information about conditions and outbreaks at reopened schools to educators@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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