

# Thousands of students return for in-person schooling in Chicago

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*The next Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee meeting is at 7 p.m. CST Tuesday, March 2. Join to help expand our work and mobilize opposition to the deadly reopening of schools. Register here and share with your coworkers!*

Today, some 37,000 kindergarten through fifth grade students are expected to return to school buildings for in-person learning in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the third largest school district in the US. Educators for grades 6-8 are also to return to buildings on Monday in preparation for the return of their students, who also number in the tens of thousands, on March 8.

The vast majority of CPS families are choosing to keep students at home and learning remotely in this dangerous phase of the pandemic. According to the *Sun Times*, more than 90 percent of schools will be under half full and more than 40 percent will be less than a quarter full. Most classrooms will have under 10 students returning and some rooms will have no in-person attendance at all.

Instruction is taking place under the so-called “hybrid” model, where educators are responsible for teaching both students participating online and in the classroom. Referred to by some teachers as the “worst of both worlds,” hybrid learning poses serious challenges for time and attention to students, demanding management of technical aspects of online and in-person classroom simultaneously, and the modification of curriculum.

In one of the most nakedly punitive aspects of the reopening, CPS is forcing teachers without in-person students and without an approved medical exception to come into buildings to teach remotely, instead of teaching from home, thus exposing themselves to other adults and children in the buildings. Their alternative is to take an unpaid leave until they receive a vaccine.

CPS official guidance states if there are three or more cases in a building in a two-week period, that school building will need to move learning back online. The district has reportedly spent more than \$980,000 on a contract

tracing system that, at bottom, relies on self-reporting via questionnaire and email notifications of exposure, which is not appropriate for urgent notices and will not be seen quickly by families who have no computer or smartphone at home.

Dr. Howard Ehrman, once Chicago’s Assistant Commissioner of Public Health, has been a vocal critic of CPS’ reopening plans. His comment to *Chalkbeat* points out the district’s poor preparation as tens of thousands of children and staff are returning to buildings: “There has to be a specific contact tracer assigned to every school.”

At last Wednesday’s school board meeting, the district approved the creation of a policy requiring all CPS employees to disclose whether they have received a COVID-19 vaccine. Though educators are not essential workers, the campaign to force reopening of schools has accelerated a mad dash for vaccine access in the state. While many teachers agree no one should ever have to risk their lives simply to keep a job, the fact is some households have been financially battered over the last year, and an indefinite unpaid leave on short notice is not a viable option.

Reopening of schools in New York’s and Chicago’s districts preceded the aggressive push currently underway to reopen the largest districts nationwide, pressing adults back to work with the aim of returning employers to high rates of profitability. Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot, backed by the Biden administration and American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, led this campaign nationally throughout the month of February, even as her administration became mired deeper in crisis.

It is widely understood by public health experts that COVID-19 is spread through the air, requiring filtration and air quality testing as bare minimum standards for workplace safety. But so beholden are government institutions to the interests of corporations and banks, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines for schools studiously ignores the air quality issue while allowing schools to open “at any level of community transmission.”

Last month, Dr. Robert Schooley, MD, Donald Milton,

MD, DrPH, of the University of Maryland in College Park, and the University of Minnesota's Michael Osterholm, PhD, MPH, who directs the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy, issued a letter demanding the airborne spread be accounted for by the CDC and guidance be issued.

Milton explained, "Government officials must fully recognize inhalation exposure as a major way COVID-19 spreads and take immediate action to control and limit this exposure. For months the scientific evidence has been clear: Aerosol transmissions are a major way this virus spreads."

With every passing week, as more teachers and students are brought back, the real character of the February 10 agreement between Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Teachers Union is becoming clear. The forced reopening of the schools in Chicago, hailed as a model for reopening nationally, was aimed at reopening the economy for profits, and not because it achieved any of the most basic aims of safety or improved educational outcomes. Instead it will inevitably result in more unnecessary illness and death.

In a continuation of its abject betrayal of Chicago educators and the wider community, the Chicago Teachers Union is beginning negotiations with CPS to reopen the high schools, grades 9-12.

CTU President Jesse Sharkey told the *Sun Times*' Fran Spielman, speaking on high school reopening in comparison to the last round of negotiations, in which the CTU barely held off a strike and forced through an agreement: "It can't repeat itself. That's not an acceptable outcome. We have to be able to start with the things which we believe and I hope and think we hold in common, which is, we want students in buildings.

"In-person is better in every way save one, there's a pandemic right now. We should work together and figure out ways to make school safe as possible while still doing the things we need to do to help kids be safe and families be safe."

The CTU, and the parent unions AFT and NEA, have ably demonstrated their willingness to meet the ruling class' demands at the expense of life and health of the teachers they claim to represent and the health of the public as a whole.

The CPS-CTU agreement mandates each school building have a safety committee involving teachers, staff and administration to take safety complaints. These committees, which do not exist in all schools yet, are to be involved in decision-making about when a building may return to learning remote due to infections.

Labor-management collaboration on monitoring safety is supposedly to take place under conditions where more than 30 teachers are being brought up on disciplinary charges by the district for speaking with parents about the dangers

COVID-19 poses to children and families, as well as the problems involved with "hybrid" learning. More than 110 teachers were initially targeted by CPS for discipline in an attempt to intimidate them into silence. The CPS-CTU collaboration raises the danger such a committee will be used against teachers.

According to WBEZ, CPS officials claimed some parents switched their children from in-person to remote after hearing from their teachers. CPS officials claim one teacher wrote: "While the child mortality rate is low, it is not non-existent. Having lost a child myself, I can tell you that this is not a club you want to join."

In fact, there have been numerous unnecessary and horrifying tragedies involving young children falling ill and dying of COVID-19. In just the latest episode in the neighboring state of Michigan, 10-year-old Dae'Shun Jamison, who was initially asymptomatic, developed the COVID-19-related multisystem inflammatory syndrome that has been affecting young children. The disease irreparably damaged his extremities and both his hands and legs have been amputated. He has been hospitalized for months.

The defense of all those silenced for speaking out about the dangers of contracting COVID-19 — workers, including teachers, and scientist whistleblowers like Rebekah Jones—has been a central demand of the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

Educators in Chicago and around the world must draw the lessons of the reopening of schools in Chicago and take the struggle for safety into their own hands, uniting with parents and students to build safety committees in schools that educators — not union and management — control, and that express the needs and interests of the workers, not the Democratic Party's political aims or the financial interests of the corporations and banks it serves.

There can be no "safe" return to in-person learning as the pandemic is permitted to spread and as the vaccine rollout is conducted a glacial pace. Preparations must be made for a political general strike, to take learning remote, halt non-essential production, and demand the needed financial support be extended to households and small businesses until disease rates fall and vaccination is widespread.



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