

Suburban teachers strike

Chicago Public Schools prepares for next round of students to return

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The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is independent of the CTU and both corporate political parties. It aims to unite educators, parents, students and the broader working class to prepare strike action to close all schools and nonessential workplaces. Register here for the March 9 meeting at 7 p.m. CST.

Friday marked the end of the first week back in buildings for an expected 37,000 K–5 students in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), along with staff for grades 6–8. On Monday, March 8, another roughly 20,000 grade 6–8 students are expected to return to buildings.

Teachers are reporting unsafe conditions on return, including unmasked students and staff in buildings, sloppy self-reporting that places all responsibility on individual teachers and students and filth in schools. One elementary school teacher reported having to wash down desks, floors, rugs and windows and dispose of mouse droppings that continue to reappear.

According to CPS' official COVID tracker reported for the week of February 28 to March 6, there were 21 confirmed cases at 20 schools, and 86 people quarantined in 10 schools. At 10 of the schools where cases were confirmed, zero were reported quarantined.

Since schools have reopened the first week of January, the district reports more than 300 adult and 27 student cases of COVID-19.

Official figures of how many students of this second “phase” of students actually returned have still not been publicized. On Thursday, CPS' Chief Education Officer Latanya McDade was quoted in WGN saying, “We don't have that attendance data ... until after K–8 comes back. Once they come back next week we can

look at the data and share with the public.”

Families of another more than 140,000 students who remain remote are being encouraged by the city to opt-in to in-person learning for the last quarter of the year from April to June.

While there are not currently plans in place to return 74,000 high school students and their teachers to buildings, Chicago Teachers Union President Jesse Sharkey and Vice President Stacy Davis Gates have reassured the business elite, their representatives in the Lightfoot administration and CPS leadership that the union is in full agreement on the need for them to return as well.

As was the case when the CTU rammed through a deal last month to send elementary and middle school teachers back into buildings, negotiations are reportedly taking place this week behind closed doors.

Families of both elementary and high school students are being asked to decide whether to join in-person learning no later than March 22. No details of the conditions in high schools have even been made public.

Just days before a reopening scheduled March 8, negotiations reportedly broke down between CTU and Passages Charter School, with 40 educators and about 360 students on the far-north side of the city.

In January, CTU's Davis Gates held up the charter school operators as good examples of bargaining on safety. Referring to Passages, Acero and Latino Youth schools, she said: “They have been able to get agreements based on safety and humanity... the demands are very similar, if not the same. The only block in this, the only person choosing a lockout of educators is the mayor and the Chicago Public Schools.”

The issues in dispute—wide-ranging safety concerns, the ability to work remotely and the impact of teacher evaluations—are much the same as in the rest of the district, but CTU’s deal with CPS to reopen K–8 grades did not cover charter schools, whose management negotiate with CTU directly.

Bourbonnais teachers strike

Teachers in Bourbonnais Elementary School District 53 went on strike March 4, shutting down classes for the district’s 2,400 students. District educators are determined to fight against historically low pay in the district, located some 50 miles south of Chicago, as well as the attempt by the district’s board to cut benefits for new hires.

The contract with the district, which covers 167 teachers and educators, expired in August of last year. Negotiations have broken down over the district’s insistence on negotiating a three year contract, rather than the two years favored by the Bourbonnais Education Association (BEA).

The latest proposal from the board would see educators in Bourbonnais receiving a 3.5 percent raise in the first year and 3 percent in each of years two and three, while the BEA proposed 4 percent raises for each of the two contract years. This was a retreat on the part of the union from earlier proposals, which demanded a 5.3 percent increase in year one and overall increases of 2.7 percent and 4 percent in the subsequent years.

Despite having \$10 million in its financial reserves, the district continues to insist that it must be “prudent with taxpayer money and its obligation to pull the District out of the financial distress it is currently facing,” a transparent attempt to use the crisis created by the pandemic to carry out long-planned attacks on teachers.

Comments on the *Kankakee Daily Journal’s* Facebook page for an article on the strike indicate overwhelming parent and community support for the striking teachers. The first comment, echoed by many of those following, notes, “These teachers deserve more than what they are asking for and have conceded so much! The board needs to go! Support our teachers

100%.”

In its final offer document posted to the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board website, the BEA blames the scrapping of the step and lane pay grade system for the erosion of wages in the district, which are below the county and state averages. As noted by the BEA, the average pay of district teachers is \$50,269, compared to the statewide average of \$68,083, or 26 percent less, while administrative salaries are only 13 percent below average. Wages in the district took a dive in 2013, falling to \$42,957 from its prior year average of \$51,623, far in excess of the average decline seen in the state as a whole.

Aside from limiting wage increases, the district’s board, by its own admission, is seeking to institute a two-tier system of health benefits, with new teachers forced to pay more out of their own pockets for medical costs, lowering their effective pay even further. The attack on health care while the COVID-19 pandemic continues is not lost on teachers, who have been teaching in Bourbonnais classrooms since the beginning of the school year.

Although district negotiators dropped earlier plans to also attack teacher retirement benefits, teachers are increasingly concerned that low wages and the attack on benefits such as health care and retirement will make it difficult to attract new hires.

With current inflation estimates of 2.2 percent, and expectations of elevated inflation over the next few years, educators will see a considerable part of their raises evaporate under either the BEA or district plan. Far from fighting for what teachers really deserve, the BEA’s own step and lane salary schedule shows it is also working to keep wage growth under control, with a first-year teacher in the first lane, possessing just a bachelor’s degree, making \$37,620 for the first contract year.



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