

Chicago teachers and parents: Stop the school reopenings! Oppose the policy of social murder!

Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
13 March 2021

*Illinois educators, parents, students and supporters are invited to participate in our next meeting this **Tuesday, March 16 at 7pm CT**. All who agree with this statement are encouraged to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee at wsws.org/edsafety.*

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee opposes the effort to further reopen Chicago Public Schools (CPS) under conditions of continued spread of COVID-19 and rapid growth of more dangerous strains of the virus. There are currently no conditions under which in-person schooling can be made safe. Schools must be closed and remote learning maintained and improved in order to bring the pandemic under control.

According to the Illinois Department of Public Health, schools are the single largest source of COVID-19 transmission in the state and have been since February.

All educators, parents, students and workers should join our fight to halt the return to in-person learning under such life-threatening conditions.

This week, the latest phase of reopening took place with 6th through 8th grade students returning to buildings. The district is also applying pressure on families of students who continue to learn remotely, including roughly 140,000 K–8 students and tens of thousands of high school students, mandating that they decide no later than March 22 whether they will resume in-person learning in the fourth quarter of the year. Scant details have emerged regarding CPS high schools reopening, and negotiations continue into the second week between the district and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU).

In other Chicagoland districts, the return to buildings is well underway. South suburban educators report very little consideration is being given to ventilation, masking and distancing requirements, especially among the younger grades. This week, more than 1,200 south suburban Bradley Bourbonnais High School students returned to in-person learning five days per week.

Epidemiologists are increasingly warning of the dangers posed by the rapid reopening orchestrated by the Biden administration. Dr. Michael Osterholm stated on *Meet the Press* last Sunday, “So right now, we do have to keep America as safe as we can by not letting up on any of the public health measures we’ve taken. And we need to get people vaccinated as quickly as we can.”

In an interview with MedPage Today, Dr. Eric Feigl-Ding commented on the B.1.1.7 variant first discovered in the UK. He

said, “B.1.1.7 increases viral load and previously, we think, a lot of kids’ cases were underreported and underdiagnosed. This is a well-known phenomenon. In Mississippi, it was 68 times underdiagnosed back in last May. By September, it was still 12 times underdiagnosed for kids in terms of diagnosis-to-infection ratio. Now it seems with higher viral loads, we might be picking up more cases in kids because the signal is now a little bit stronger in kids that it might have some trend.”

“That’s what I’m trying to point out, that there is a lot of evidence that shows kids are maybe at higher relative risk than the previous strain here was, and a lot of the notions that kids are completely immune, or virtually immune, as they used to say, some of the pro-herd or natural infection herd immunity advocates used to say, is terribly dangerous. Kids need to mask and schools need to be ventilated. We cannot assume that simply going back to school, the kids will be safe, even if community transmission is dropping or low, and it’s not dropping anymore.”

The national campaign to force everyone back into schools is intensifying. On March 9, the Illinois State Board of Education issued a letter suggesting that revised guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) mean that schools are to offer students “at increased risk of severe illness (including those with special health care needs) or who live with people at increased risk... the option of remote instruction.”

In other words, remote instruction may not remain an option for families who choose not to expose children to the disease risks involved with in-person learning unless they or someone in their family is deemed high risk. Under conditions where there still is no vaccine approved for children, this policy is incredibly reckless.

CPS is also making remote learning as uncomfortable and inconvenient as possible. Parents report their remote students’ access to specials—art, music, physical education—has been denied with the excuse that these cannot be provided to both remote and in-person students.

Information about conditions must continue to be reported by teachers to the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Committee for publication. In their drive to reopen schools, Chicago city leaders have engaged in a campaign of relentless lying and bullying. In December and January, CPS even presented false information about COVID-19 transmission, infamously declaring in a “fact sheet” that public health officials had found no link between

schools being open and transmission of the disease.

Lessons of the CPS-CTU agreement

As the Democrats and the teachers unions proceed with reopening across the US, Chicago educators, parents and students are still reckoning with the meaning of the wretched agreement concluded between CPS and the CTU. The aim of the agreement—which continued with the “phased” reopening of the district, dividing teachers by grade level and preparing the way for a full reopening in the fourth quarter—was to set a precedent by restarting in-person classes in the third-largest district in the country in order to assist in the reopening of all other districts that were still teaching remotely, in order to get the maximum number of parents back to work.

The leaders of the CTU—above all President Jesse Sharkey and Vice President Stacy Davis Gates—pressured teachers to accept the deal they reached with CPS and Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot, claiming no more could be won in negotiations and a strike would be difficult and not have widespread support.

Last week, CPS decided that educators must disclose their COVID-19 vaccination status and stipulated that vaccinated teachers do not qualify for unpaid leaves of absence. In response to this criminal policy, the CTU simply advised members to not return the survey disclosing vaccination information and to wait for a legal review by the union before responding. They said this information disclosure must be negotiated with the union.

Yesterday, the evening before the survey was due, Sharkey sent out an email to CTU members talking out of both sides of his mouth. While saying they continue to recommend waiting to respond, he added that the union has a meeting with the board on Monday and said that employers can legally ask for vaccination status.

Sharkey said the CTU leadership “do not believe CPS intends to take any immediate steps to enforce its made up deadline.” He covered up the fact that at least 34 members are currently suspended with discipline pending as punishment for speaking with parents about disease transmission and health risks in the schools and about the grim realities of hybrid learning.

The reopening of schools in Chicago is the latest and most consequential betrayal by the CTU, which has endangered the lives of countless educators, students, parents and community members. The union played the critical role in forcing through the contract last month, pressuring teachers to accept the deal and giving them only one day to read and discuss the terms of reopening. Due to the union’s antidemocratic maneuvers and their false portrayal of teachers as isolated, roughly 54 percent of all CTU members voted to accept the deal.

In the aftermath of this betrayal, educators have been sent back to their classrooms in a totally chaotic fashion, and many still have not even been able to process or understand the conditions of the reopening plan.

The actions of the CTU make them culpable in facilitating the

ruling class policy of “herd immunity,” predicated on letting the virus rip through the population. Democratic and Republican politicians, with the support of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), National Education Association (NEA) and unions in every industry, are responsible for the devastating health and social consequences that have resulted from these policies, including nearly 30 million COVID-19 infections and 545,378 deaths in the US alone.

The only rational option is to halt in-person learning and to refuse any further reopening of schools. Our committee is the only organization fighting for this, and we urge Chicago educators, parents and students to expand this committee into every school and neighborhood throughout the region, advancing the following key demands.

Demands of the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee:

1. Stop the school reopenings! Maintain and improve remote learning until the disease is controlled & vaccination is widespread in the community, not just among school workers. Remote learning must be improved. The majority of all students are still exclusively remote. Despite the media reporting that kids are returning, most are still remote 3–5 days of the week. It is unconscionable to put all of these people at risk when a safe alternative is available, but one that happens to be inconvenient for business interests who want parents back on the job.

2. Publicize via livestream the CPS-CTU negotiations to reopen the high schools! Schools are the leading center of COVID-19 transmission and CPS families and the community as a whole have a right to know: What calculations about teacher, student and community lives and health are being made? More than 80 bargaining sessions took place behind the scenes leading up to the February agreement that reopened the district.

3. Immediately reinstate with full pay all educators who have been disciplined for speaking out about the dangers of in-person learning! It is an outrage that the CTU concluded an agreement before these workers were reinstated and made whole.

4. Expand support in the working class for a political general strike to halt the reopening of schools and non-essential businesses to control disease and demand the needed support for households and small businesses. Community spread can be controlled, but only through mass action by the working class.



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