As the ruling class pushes for full reopening

K-12 schools identified as largest source of COVID-19 infections in Illinois

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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 nonessential workplaces. Participate in our next meeting **Tuesday, March 16 at 7pm CT.** *Illinois educators, parents and students should join our committee at wsws.org/edsafety.*

Reopened schools in Chicago and throughout Illinois have become the largest source of COVID-19 infections in the state. Despite the demonstrated ability of schools to drive disease spread, school officials and politicians are aggressively pushing to get as many students as possible back into buildings for the fourth quarter term beginning April 19—just in time to fulfill the Biden administration's promise to reopen schools in his first 100 days in office.

According to contact tracing data from the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), schools in Illinois are now the number one potential exposure location for COVID-19, accounting for 21.6 percent of cases reported to the state or local health departments. This is more than double the next-largest category, Business or Retail, which comes in at only 9.9 percent. Notably, this figure does not include colleges, universities or daycare facilities.

Although there has been a mountain of propaganda from the media, schools and public health officials portraying in-person learning as low-risk or even safe, there have been 10 officially counted school outbreaks across the state, defined as five or more positive cases where exposure may have occurred on school grounds.

Additionally, IDPH lists 1,099 schools with potential exposures, outside of Chicago Public Schools (CPS), which are not included in this total. For the week ending March 12, CPS reported 12 cases at 10 schools, sending 42 into quarantine, including four separate learning "pods."

These numbers are largely in line with data from other parts of the country and world. In Michigan, K-12 schools have also become the largest source of outbreaks, with childcare and youth programs coming in third.

According to recent reports, Sweden shows a 123 percent increase in cases for children 0-9 and a 72 percent increase in children 10-19 since January. Underscoring the dangers involved in the pseudo-scientific "herd immunity" strategy in the context of a virus that can mutate, the more infectious B.1.1.7 variant now accounts for 50 percent of COVID-19 infections in Stockholm.

Teachers have expressed anger at the carelessness and speed with which schools are being reopened. One teacher commented on Facebook, "They are just trying to reopen and they don't care about the people." Another noted that it "seems like many districts are pretending that COVID is not still a thing. Recess, lunch in classrooms. Needless to say, my kids are remote and at home."

The danger presented by in-person learning while the pandemic continues has not been lost on most working class families in Chicago, who have so far largely resisted the hectoring by school officials and politicians to bring their children back to school buildings. Indeed, the number of CPS students whose families opted-in to in-person learning dropped from around 77,000 in December to 60,278, on February 26—that is, just 29 percent of students in eligible grades.

This reversal by nearly 17,000 students occurred before the final reopening waves for elementary school grades, which concluded last Monday as a result of the sellout agreement reached between the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and Chicago Public Schools (CPS). The majority of elementary students, roughly 145,000, remain remote, in addition to the district's 74,000 high school students, whose return date has yet to be negotiated with the CTU.

Under conditions in which the ruling class, led by the Biden administration, is attempting to falsely portray the pandemic as essentially contained, CPS officials have consistently tried to manipulate parents into sending their

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children back to in-person learning through the use of preference surveys or questionnaires. The first round of surveys required parents to opt-in to in-person learning by December 7 of last year.

While families indicating an intent to return to in-person learning were given the option to switch to remote learning at any time, the opposite was not true for families opting to keep their children learning remotely. This had the effect of artificially inflating the support for in-person learning and encouraging parents to take the risk of sending their children into schools.

Now, in an aggressive bid to get the remaining students back into buildings and overcome parent resistance, school officials have sent another questionnaire to families whose children are still learning remotely, asking them to indicate their preferences for the fourth quarter school term that begins on April 19.

With these questionnaires due March 19, CPS is trying to bully parents into sending their children back to clearly unsafe schools. Families selecting remote learning will be required to wait until the next academic year to change their preference, with those selecting in-person told they will be allowed to change their preference whenever they wish. However, there are indications that the state government may soon push to end the option of remote learning.

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and IDPH issued updated joint guidance on March 9. Aside from suggesting that schools can abandon on-campus symptom screening and decrease their social distancing requirement to three feet if their staff are vaccinated, the agencies write, "Consistent with the updated guidance from the CDC, families of students who are at increased risk of severe illness (including those with special health care needs) or who live with people at increased risk must be given the option of remote instruction." In other words, those at merely normal risk or who live with those at normal risk may see the option for remote learning restricted, forcing families to risk exposure.

This is of a piece with the recent move by CPS officials to reevaluate the requests for accommodations for teachers who teach remotely. Many teachers assumed accommodations granted to them would continue for the rest of the school year, but on February 24 the city Board of Education required teachers to disclose their current vaccination status. Teachers who indicate they have been vaccinated may see their remote teaching accommodations ended for the fourth quarter, even if they requested an accommodation due to living with household members at elevated risk.

Among these "accommodations" is taking a period of unpaid leave. This creates additional burdens, as many households have been strained by the pandemic. Teachers on unpaid leave are still responsible for the employee portion of health insurance costs due at the end of the month.

Although CTU leaders initially told teachers to wait before answering the questionnaire on their vaccination status, CTU President Jesse Sharkey eventually stated he believed the district had the right to ask, while telling teachers to hold off on replying. He said, "I don't have a problem with people answering this kind of survey. I do have a problem with CPS not bargaining it with us." Like all the other attacks on teachers, Sharkey has no real objection to the ending of accommodations. Rather, his only complaint is that CPS did not collaborate with the CTU on the issue.

Union officials continue to negotiate with the district over the details on reopening high schools, with CPS CEO Janice Jackson and chief education officer LaTanya McDade writing in an email to parents, "We hope [high school] students will be able to return to school as early as mid-April," which would be in line with the start of the fourth quarter. Sharkey has indicated his full support for the reopening, stating, "I am confident that we can be delivering in-person education for folks in high school."

Suburban school districts throughout the region are also announcing in-person learning at high schools, putting the pressure on CPS teachers and parents to relent. On March 9, Arlington Heights District 214 announced high schools would reopen five days a week on April 5. In Naperville District 204, located in the third-largest city in the state, officials plan to bring students back five days a week on April 7.

After the widespread teacher opposition to reopening schools nearly broke out of the control of the CTU, the union intends to keep negotiations over high schools completely under wraps. Educators should oppose this conspiracy, halt the reopening of high schools and demand elementary schools return to remote learning immediately before the COVID-19 pandemic inevitably accelerates in the wake of the aggressive reopening.

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 send reports on the conditions and outbreaks at reopened schools to educators@wsws.org.

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