Chicago Teachers Union, school district announce plan to reopen high schools on April 19

Alexander Fangmann
17 March 2021

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 to stop the spread of the pandemic. Register for the next meeting *on March 23 at 7pm CT. We call on all Chicago educators, parents and students to join our committee at* wsws.org/edsafety.

On Tuesday, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) officials informed parents and staff of district plans to reopen high schools for in-person classes beginning April 19, the first day of the fourth quarter term. The announcement was made in a message crafted with the close collaboration of Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) President Jesse Sharkey.

Even with COVID-19 positivity rates and case numbers rising in the city again following the resumption of in-person learning in elementary schools and the lifting of restrictions on business activity, high schools are to be reopened in line with the demands of Mayor Lori Lightfoot, Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker and President Biden.

The message, jointly signed by CPS CEO Janice Jackson and Chief Education Officer LaTanya McDade, is aimed at drumming up support from parents for in-person schooling, among whom it is widely unpopular. Just 29 percent of elementary school parents have chosen the option to return to classrooms. Parents have until March 19 to make their decision about whether their children will attend in-person or continue learning remotely.

Though K-8 students have been back since March, CPS have released no data on the actual number of students who have returned for in-person learning.

Tuesday's communication from the district leaders indicates that CPS is planning to bring back high school students "at least two days per week." At two days per week, this would mean high school students, in exchange for putting themselves, their families and friends at risk of contracting the virus, would each experience a mere 18 days of in-person learning before the end of the school year in June.

Jackson and McDade claim in their message, "Following the successful reopening of our elementary schools as well as new guidance from the Biden Administration that supports bringing students back to classrooms, we know we can safely resume in-person high school instruction as long as the right plan is in place."

This is a complete lie. In the first place, CPS itself has reported 27 cases at 25 schools from March 7 through March 13, and 121 students have been sent into quarantine, including 12 separate learning "pods," or cohorts of students which attend classes together two days per week. This is very likely a significant undercount of the number of actual positive cases, as younger children are less likely to be symptomatic and are less likely to be tested.

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.

Furthermore, the reopening of elementary schools has not only led to school-based infections but has in all likelihood contributed to recent increases in COVID-19 positivity rates and cases in Chicago, which now stand

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at 2.9 percent and 295, respectively. After declining steadily following the beginning of the year, both metrics began to plateau following the resumption of in-person learning at CPS. In recent days, both have even shown an increase.

The only factor complicating such a clear attribution is the decision by city and state officials to lift capacity restrictions for restaurants and other businesses at the same time that schools were reopened, flying in the face of all scientific research on the safety of reopening schools.

Even with COVID-19 on the rise again in Illinois, Pritzker announced plans on Wednesday to further loosen restrictions on business activity, citing the needs of the "economy." Although Illinois is largely in "phase 4," the governor is developing a new incremental reopening plan to be announced later this week that creates additional steps between current restrictions and the full reopening represented by phase 5.

Outside of the Abraham Lincoln Memorial Hospital in Lincoln, Illinois, Pritzker made clear that the needs of business take priority over health considerations. "We're working with industry leaders, (and) we're working with our doctors at (the Illinois Department of Public Health) as well as other experts in the state to make sure that the phased reopening is not only healthy for everybody *but also good for the economy* as we move it forward (emphasis added)."

Additionally, far from "the right plan" being "in place" for elementary schools, as Jackson and McDade claim, educators have reported deep confusion and incoherence in the implementation of safety protocols and other so-called mitigations in schools. Among the issues have been the cleanliness of classrooms, as well as ventilation problems that have led teachers to keep their windows open, even as temperatures fell below freezing over the past week. This is to say nothing of inconsistent mask-wearing or the farcical and powerless "safety committees" created by the agreement between CPS and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU).

CTU President Jesse Sharkey sent a message to educators immediately following the district's announcement of the high school reopening date, claiming, "We have no agreement on returning to in-person learning in high schools on any date, nor will there be an agreement until we know our school buildings can reopen safely."

Sharkey's message is pure posturing. A WGN report made clear that Sharkey and union officials were fully informed about the message before it was sent, and Sharkey himself had offered changes to its wording. Sharkey's suggestions to Kaitlyn Girard, the CPS labor relations officer, included, "Couple things: I'd change 'we have also centered on the goal' with 'we hope to' or something along that line," and "Negotiations are NOT finalized yet or some other indicator that this process hasn't concluded and this setup isn't carved in stone."

These emails between Sharkey and district officials further confirm the betrayal of teachers and the working class as a whole by the union. After engineering an abject capitulation on the part of the union in reopening elementary schools, the CTU is attempting to do the same again with high schools, carrying out the aims of the ruling class while attempting to preserve at all costs a role for themselves in the process.

Nowhere in Sharkey's message does he indicate the CTU takes any issue with the plan to reopen high schools, despite the clear evidence that high school age children are infected and transmit COVID-19 at similar rates to young adults. In fact, CTU, along with teachers unions nationally, have claimed it is possible to reopen schools safely, as they work to shore up political support for the Biden administration and the Democratic Party.

Educators should reject the CTU's claims to be fighting for a safe reopening with the contempt they deserve. Chicago educators and those in other districts interested in a real fight to stop the reopening and to close schools before they create the next surge should join the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee at wsws.org/edsafety.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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