

Chicago school attendance figures show less than a quarter of students actually going to schools in person

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21 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. We call on all Chicago educators, parents and students to join our committee at wsws.org/edsafety.

After weeks of stonewalling, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) released attendance figures indicating just 24 percent of students were actually participating in in-person learning. In light of the continued resistance of parents and the wider community to reopening schools during the pandemic, the administration of Mayor Lori Lightfoot and CPS district officials are doing everything they can bring more students back into classrooms, including revoking teacher accommodations allowing them to teach remotely.

Though CPS administration claimed to be “encouraged” by the figures, there is a high degree of sensitivity surrounding the release of this information, indicated by its release late on Friday afternoon. Such a practice is almost exclusively reserved for information which the releasing party hopes will get buried in the news cycle. Moreover, the figures themselves demonstrate widespread opposition the policies of Lightfoot, the Democratic Party and the school district among working class families.

According to the data, 49,281 students have attended in-person learning in school buildings at least once between February 11 and March 12. That number represents 24 percent of the 205,383 students that have been eligible to attend since the district reopened schools for elementary and special education students. CPS officials claim 73 percent of students who opted in

to in-person learning show up to schools each day on average.

The release of these partial attendance figures show that interest has continued to fall for in-person learning since CPS asked parents to opt-in in December. Back then, the number of CPS students whose families said they wanted them in schools was 77,000. This fell to 60,278, by late February—just 29 percent of students in eligible grades.

There is reason to believe the district’s attempts to return a large mass of high school students and educators to schools by April 19, the beginning of the fourth quarter academic term, has met with some difficulty. Just hours before the March 19 deadline for parents to opt-in to in-person learning for their students, the district announced it would be extending the deadline through Tuesday, March 23.

Schools continue to be the number one source of potential COVID-19 exposures, according to contact tracing data reported by the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH). Moreover, the number of cases reported at CPS itself has continued to grow since schools have reopened. For the week of March 14 through March 20, CPS reported 28 confirmed cases at 23 schools. This has sent 345 students and educators into quarantine, nearly three times the number quarantined the previous week.

Despite the danger posed to children and workers who have not yet been vaccinated, CPS is pulling out all the stops to ensure that students who remain learning remotely see their learning experiences degraded, including forcing teachers in classrooms to teach both in-person and remote students at the same time.

The district is aggressively pushing educators back into classrooms, including threatening to revoke accommodations to teach remotely that were granted pursuant to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Though such a move would, on the face of it, violate the law in question, the district claimed in an email to teachers, “These accommodations were granted, as all accommodations are, based on need and are subject to change as those needs evolve.” More likely, the district is continuing to run into difficulties staffing classrooms, as a survey from the Chicago Principals and Administrators Association suggested as many as one-third of in-person classrooms are being taught by a teacher working remotely.

The email, sent to educators who did not earlier indicate to the district they have received a vaccination, claims all educators have had the “opportunity to be vaccinated” and suggests those who are not able to produce medical or religious reasons for a lack of vaccination will have their “telework status” converted to “in-person work” effective April 16.

One teacher wrote on social media, “CPS and CTU [Chicago Teachers Union] is a joke! ADA is supposed to be federally protected. What company do you know will pull ADA accommodations without obviously individually reviewing them? Most would be afraid of a class action suit or an EEOC suit, but not good old CPS because they know our union has NO TEETH. We are a joke to them, and we know they didn’t review individual ADAs- they sent everyone the same form letter and pulling everyone’s accommodation on the same day. Where is our union? Quiet. Or planning another useless town hall.”

In a message to teachers last week, CTU president Jesse Sharkey actually defended the district’s use of vaccination status to force teachers back into classrooms. “As we’ve said, there are good public health and policy reasons for an employer—particularly a large school district—to know the vaccination status of employees during a pandemic. And as a general matter, it is legal for employers, including CPS, to require employees to disclose their vaccination status. It is likely that we will eventually need to report this information.”

Sharkey continues, “But CPS is legally obligated to bargain over this change in the terms and conditions of employment and that bargaining has not concluded.”

Sharkey’s objection, as always, is that union officials are not given enough of an opportunity to hoodwink educators into believing they are doing anything on their behalf.

As a matter of fact, it was further confirmed over the past week exactly how Sharkey and the union leadership collaborate directly with CPS officials, Lightfoot and the Democratic Party. While publicly lodging a complaint over the district’s email to parents on the reopening of high schools as “more unilateralism,” a WGN report made clear Sharkey and other union leaders were intimately involved in crafting the message, and Sharkey himself suggested changes in wording.

These revelations, as well as the whole recent history of the CTU, including its abject capitulation on reopening schools, make clear that in order to defend their interests and even their lives, as well as the broader community, educators must break out of the old, ossified unions, tied by a thousand threads to the Democratic Party and the capitalist state.

The way forward can only be through the building of new organizations, independent of and in complete opposition to the betrayals of the teacher unions. Educators who agree with this perspective should attend the next meeting of the Chicago Educators Rank and File Safety Committee on Tuesday, March 23 at 7 p.m. CDT.



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