

COVID-19 cases in Chicago and throughout Illinois increase following reopening of schools and businesses

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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. We call on all Chicago educators, parents and students to join our committee at wsws.org/edsafety, and register to attend our next online meeting this Tuesday at 7 p.m. CDT.

Cases of COVID-19 increased sharply in Chicago and the rest of Illinois over the past week, following the widespread reopening of elementary schools for in-person instruction and the relaxation of public health restrictions on restaurants and other businesses. Despite the spread of the disease and the danger posed by new coronavirus variants, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) officials have continued their push to get more students and educators back into classrooms for the start of the fourth quarter term on April 19.

According to Chicago's COVID Dashboard, the current citywide test positivity rate is 3.8 percent, based on a seven-day rolling average, up from the 3.0 percent the week before. Daily average cases in the city are up 407, a 27 percent increase over the last week. The Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) classifies the current situation as "High Risk," meaning there have been five days or more of 10 percent increases in cases over the previous week.

The increase in cases is not limited to Chicago. COVID-19 infections are increasing throughout the state and the country, a consequence of the Biden administration's push to reopen schools and the broader economy. In Illinois, schools remain the number one source of new COVID-19 infections,

according to the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH). Schools account for 21.5 percent of cases, more than double the rate of the next highest category, Business or Retail establishments.

IDPH data also indicates there are currently 16 school-based COVID-19 outbreaks, defined as five or more cases, across the state. Since the week beginning February 28, there have been 1,889 infections registered among children ages 5–11 and 3,046 registered among children 12–17.

Chicago officials, like their counterparts nationally, have repeatedly claimed schools are "safe," in contradiction to serious research which has found that closing schools is one of the most effective ways to stop the spread of coronavirus. Dr. Marielle Fricchione, CDPH's medical director, even claimed in January that teachers are "very good at infection control" because they have an "innate sense" of whether things like surfaces or objects are clean because of their extensive experience being around sick children.

Tragically, the increase in infections in Chicago resulted in the death this week of CPS student Zmaya Bell. Bell, an 18-year-old student at Simeon Career Academy, died of COVID-19-related complications on Wednesday, according to her family.

While early reports indicated lower rates of disease in children and younger people, many of those initial studies were conducted during periods when schools were largely shut down for in-person learning. Since schools have reopened, infection rates have shot up among these age groups. In Kansas, for example, those ages 14–17 now have the highest incidence rate in the state.

At a press conference last week, CDPH Director Dr.

Allison Arwady laid the blame for the sharp rise in cases on “socializing” among young adults, denying that schools were a concern either in Chicago or “anywhere in the US.” Even with restrictions loosened on indoor dining in the city, allowing restaurants to open at 50 percent capacity, Arwady denied this was significant. “Where we’ve seen significant outbreaks, it’s been around socializing, and some of that socializing may be taking place at bars or restaurants, but where we’re seeing the connections, it tends to be more among university groups, people who are knowing each other and then are gathering in given spaces.”

The attempt by Arwady and the Lightfoot administration to shift the blame for the surge on individuals is crucial to the city’s continued reopening plans. Large majorities of parents, especially working-class parents, in Chicago are opposed to sending their children back to schools for in-person learning while the coronavirus continues to pose a danger. According to attendance figures released last week, just 24 percent of students overall have attended in-person learning at least once.

A recent questionnaire sent out by CPS found that only 43 percent of parents indicated an interest in in-person learning in the fourth quarter term, which begins April 19. This number, like the previous result from CPS’ questionnaire in December, almost certainly overstates the number of students who will actually show up for the fourth quarter, as CPS is again allowing those who opt-in to switch between in-person or remote when they choose. Only 35.6 percent of families with high school students indicated they would return.

Despite this resistance from families, CPS officials are demanding that educators return to classrooms in the fourth quarter in order to provide minimum staffing levels to reopen schools. Claiming all educators have had a chance to be vaccinated, officials are trying to cancel previously granted ADA accommodations for remote teaching and demand educators reveal their vaccination status in order to force them back into classrooms. According to recent data from a CPS board meeting, less than one-third of district workers report being vaccinated, and vaccines remain difficult to obtain in Chicago and surrounding Cook County.

Far from trying to educate working class families on

the danger of sending their children back, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has largely embraced the perspective of parent choice in regard to in-person learning, with President Jesse Sharkey recently declaring, “I don’t feel like that’s a decision we can make for our students and families.” This is completely in line with recent revelations that Sharkey and the union leadership have been working directly with CPS officials to help in reopening schools and are of a piece with the union’s acceptance of charter schools.

The abject capitulation of the union on school reopening is not a phenomenon unique to Chicago or the CORE faction of the CTU. Across the world, the unions have acted to keep workers subordinated to the interests of the ruling class and from taking the initiative to take the pandemic under control.



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