

COVID-19 cases in Pennsylvania rise as schools and businesses reopen

Alex Findijs
4 April 2021

After six weeks of declining COVID-19 infections and two weeks of new infections remaining the same, Pennsylvania is beginning to see the early signs of another wave of cases. The seven-day moving average has risen to over 5,000 cases per day, doubling in the past three weeks. Deaths remain relatively low for now, but hospitalizations have also risen by 11 percent to nearly 2,300.

Throughout the state, over one million people have been infected with COVID and over 25,243 people have died. The vaccine rollout has been one of the weakest in the nation, with just 16 percent of the population fully vaccinated. The rapid rise in infections is an indication of the spread of more contagious variants of COVID and the disastrous character of the policy of reopening schools and other businesses.

Leading the rise in cases in Pennsylvania has been the spread of more contagious variants. To save money, the administration of Democratic Governor Tom Wolf never set up programs to detect mutations by sequencing the genome of viral samples, making it difficult to determine the real number of people infected by variants. However, recent studies conducted in Pennsylvania university hospitals provide insight into the prevalence of these more contagious strains.

A recent study by University of Pennsylvania microbiologist Frederic Bushman found that one-third of patients were infected with some form of COVID-19 variant. Of the 80 patients sampled, 14 were infected by a variant from New York, 8 had the UK variant and 2 the California variant. Four of those sampled also contained a variant called R1, which is not listed as a variant of concern yet, but does contain a similar mutation to the UK and Brazil variants that may make it resistant to vaccine-induced antibodies.

Another study by the Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia sampled 50 patients, one-quarter of whom

were infected by the UK variant. Jefferson Hospital is also conducting research to determine if vaccinated staff are at risk of carrying variants of concern.

The UK variant has also been detected on university campuses. The University of Pittsburgh and Penn State have both reported large outbreaks of COVID-19 following the discovery of the UK variant among students.

The spread of variants, especially the UK variant, mirrors the developments across the country. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 26 percent of US cases of COVID-19 are the UK variant now.

Data from Helix, a company that sequences genomes, provides evidence that upwards of 36 percent of cases in Pennsylvania are the UK variant as of March 18. Their data shows a near exponential growth of the variant over the past three months. While Pennsylvania has distributed the first shot to almost a third of the population, and two shots to 16 percent, the spread of variants threatens to move faster than the vaccination process.

Starting April 4, the state will ease restrictions on businesses. Restaurants, gyms and entertainment facilities will be able to operate at 75 percent capacity, while indoor events will be able to operate at 25 percent capacity. Democratic Governor Tom Wolf said of the eased restrictions that “Pennsylvanians have stepped up and done their part of help curb the spread of COVID-19 ... It’s time to allow our restaurants, bars and other service businesses to get back to more normal operations.”

Wolf is responding to business interests that desire the end to pandemic restrictions and the return to “normal” operations. The science of the matter, however, does not align with Wolf’s class interests. Rolling back restrictions too early has already sparked a new wave of cases. The pandemic cannot be brought under control through present vaccinations alone. To pretend that the arrival of

vaccinations has negated the deadly consequences of infection is to allow the virus to return with a vengeance.

The campaign to reopen the economy has taken up its most aggressive stance in the drive to reopen schools. As of Monday afternoon, the Pennsylvania Department of Education reports that 27 percent of school districts in Pennsylvania are operating at full-time in-person instruction, 42 percent are in a hybrid model and 32 percent are full remote.

Philadelphia, as the largest school district in the state, was a leading battleground in the drive to reopen schools. On March 8, 53 K-2 schools opened, followed by 45 more on March 15 and additional schools opening throughout the rest of the month. Current district plans are for the return of grade 3-5 students on April 26 for hybrid instruction.

Just two weeks into the reopening plan, Mayfair Elementary was forced to close after at least five cases were reported. Of the 2,100 students enrolled in the school only 30 had been inside the building before it closed, according to the *Inquirer*.

Pennsylvania has not committed to reporting COVID-19 cases in schools, but teachers in Philadelphia have organized a dashboard reporting cases in schools, run by Parents United for Public Education and Caucus of Working Educators. The dashboard has reported 78 cases and two school closures since early March. Twenty-three cases were reported between just March 23 and 26.

Considering the propensity of young children to be asymptomatic carriers of the virus it is likely that the actual number of infections is much higher.

The focus on returning students to the classroom has now shifted to Pittsburgh, the second-largest school district in the state, which has been teaching remotely since March 2020.

Several thousand students will begin returning to class on Monday, April 6. Pittsburgh will return students in a staggered pattern according to their performance level in online education. Those who have not shown positive development through online instruction, 4,786 students, will return on Monday, while the rest of students, about 16,000 students, will be phased in between April 26 and May 3 in a hybrid model for two days of the week.

The district arrived on this decision without obtaining any input from the community or teachers. Superintendent Anthony Hamlet said, "it is unrealistic to continue to postpone the reopening of our schools until every teacher is vaccinated." Demanding teachers to return without the vaccination is a criminal act that will inevitably lead to

infections among teachers and staff, and likely deaths.

Meanwhile, Pennsylvania is moving to lower restrictions on schools and open the way for the virus to spread further. Following the new CDC guidelines, the space required between students has been reduced from six feet to three feet. Speaking on the change, Governor Wolf said, "Our updated recommendations bring us a step closer to a full return to in-person teaching and learning across Pennsylvania." Wolf's concern is clearly to return all students to the classroom, regardless of the public health consequences that follow.

This is further shown by the state's decision to arbitrarily reduce closure times for schools that suffer from outbreaks. The longest closure times have been reduced from 14 to 5 days, and in some instances may be as short as 1-2 days.

There is no scientific basis for these changes. The Pennsylvania state government, both Democratic and Republican politicians alike, have demonstrated a desire to lift restrictions on businesses and schools as soon as possible, regardless of the consequences to the health and lives of working class Pennsylvanians. Their primary goal is to return as many students to the classroom as possible, so that parents can return to the workplace generating profits for the business interests they are so vocally concerned about.

The pandemic is not yet contained. The vaccination process cannot move quickly enough to counter the spread of the new variants, which will create a new wave of hospitalizations and deaths far sooner than the vaccines can achieve herd immunity. In order to save lives the most vigilant restrictions must be put in place. Non-essential production must cease with full income support for workers, schools must return to virtual learning with massive investment in remote instruction and student services, especially mental health services.

Join the Pennsylvania Educators Rank & File Safety Committee for our next meeting Thursday, April 8, 7:30 Register here. Visit wsws.org/edsafety to sign up and find a committee near you.



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