

Biden's school reopening drive fuels fourth surge of pandemic in the US

Evan Blake, Zac Corrigan
5 April 2021

Over the past week, it has become abundantly clear that K-12 schools are one of the leading sources for the spread of COVID-19 throughout the US. The Biden administration's criminal pursuit of reopening the majority of all schools by the end of April, a goal which has already been reached, is now fueling the deepening surge of more infectious and lethal variants that are taking hold throughout the country. At present, only 18.5 percent of the American population is fully vaccinated, meaning that the current surge will intensify in the coming weeks and will soon produce another wave of deaths throughout the country.

The B.1.1.7 UK variant, which is 50 percent more transmissible than wild-type SARS-CoV-2, is becoming dominant throughout much of the Upper Midwest and Northeast regions. The situation is most dire in Michigan, Minnesota, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Connecticut, all of which reopened the majority of K-12 schools for in-person learning by March or earlier. In Michigan, where 82 percent of students are in schools that offer fully in-person learning, those under 10 years old are the second fastest rising group of COVID-19 cases, up 238 percent over the past month, with those aged 10–19 seeing the highest increase in cases.

What is unfolding is premeditated mass murder, which has been orchestrated by the White House, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the corporate media and the teachers unions, all of whom have conspired to distort science and stifle educators' opposition in order to reopen schools everywhere on behalf of the ruling class. The primary motive behind this policy is to enable parents to return to unsafe workplaces in order to produce corporate profits.

Throughout the pandemic, there has been no federal program to monitor COVID-19 infections and deaths tied to K-12 schools, with each district and state left to its own devices. Nearly 3.5 million children have been infected with the virus in the US, with unknown long-term repercussions. *Education Week* notes that as of March 29, 2021, at least 913 active and retired K-12 educators and personnel have died of COVID-19, of whom 257 were active teachers. While damning in themselves, these figures on infections and deaths are undoubtedly significant undercounts.

Similarly, there is no federal tracking of what type of instruction students are receiving—fully remote learning, fully in-person, or the unsafe “hybrid” model, which combines the two. According to data compiled by Burbio, the percentage of students learning remotely has decreased from 54.7 percent in mid-January—just before Biden's inauguration on January 20—to 16.3 percent today.

Of that 38.4 percentage point decline in students learning safely from home, 16.1 percent have moved to a hybrid model (now 30.6 percent of all students) and 22.3 percent resumed fully in-person learning (now 53.1 percent of all students).

Immediately after Biden's inauguration, the dominant workers' struggle in the US became the fight over reopening Chicago schools. The corporate media issued endless propaganda vilifying teachers, while Biden, Chicago's Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten, Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) President Jesse Sharkey and others engaged in back-room conspiracies to reach a deal to reopen schools, which the CTU pressured its members to support.

The reopening of Chicago schools marked a turning point in the national campaign to reopen all schools. It set the precedent for other major Democratic Party-led cities to negotiate their own deals, including in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Detroit, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, Oakland, Seattle, Portland, Las Vegas, Memphis, Nashville and other cities. At this point, every major school district in the US has either begun to reopen or is poised to do so in the coming weeks, with millions more children packed into dilapidated and poorly ventilated classrooms.

A growing number of epidemiologists and other scientists are speaking out on the dangers of opening schools and the impact children are having on the current surge.

Dr. Michael Osterholm, Director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, appeared on NBC's “Meet the Press” program on Sunday and pointed to the dire situation in Michigan, where those aged 30–50 are increasingly being hospitalized and the B.1.1.7 variant is spreading rapidly. He then stated, “Right here in Minnesota we're now seeing the other aspect of this B.1.1.7 variant that hasn't been talked much about. It infects kids very readily... These kids now are really major challenges in terms of how they transmit,” noting that 749 schools in Minnesota have had confirmed COVID-19 cases.

By early March, roughly 90 percent of all Minnesota schools had returned for in-person learning, and state officials estimate that roughly 50 percent of the COVID-19 cases in Minnesota are now the B.1.1.7 variant. Another noted epidemiologist in the state, Dr. Ruth Lynfield, recently commented on the higher attack rate that the B.1.1.7 variant has among children, stating, “We certainly get the sense that youth are what we might refer to as the leading edge of the spread of variants.”

Speaking on CBS's "Face the Nation" on Sunday, former Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Dr. Scott Gottlieb raised similar concerns, saying, "What we're seeing is pockets of infection around the country, particularly in younger people who haven't been vaccinated, and also in school-aged children."

In Michigan, the daily case rate is now more than six times higher than its low in late February—the seven-day moving average of daily new cases was 6,588 on April 4, compared to 1,045 on February 20. Over this time period, the number one source of new outbreaks was K-12 schools, which have reopened en masse in recent months.

Since February 22, Michigan's Department of Health and Human Services recorded 357 outbreaks in K-12 schools, and another 131 outbreaks in child care facilities and at school sporting events. Together these account for more than a third of Michigan's total outbreaks, which are defined as two or more cases linked by time and location among people from different households. Even more alarming, school-based outbreaks across the state have jumped 20 percent in just the last week, going from 67 outbreaks for the week reported March 29, to 81 outbreaks on April 5.

Michigan is now the state with both the country's highest case rate, 64.4 cases per 100,000 people, and the highest test positivity rate, 14.7 percent. According to Covid Act Now, on April 5 the five metropolitan areas in the US with the highest daily case rates were all in Michigan: Jackson, with 88.3 cases per 100,000 people; Detroit (78.1); Monroe (77.5); Flint (70.7); and Lansing (67.5).

Michigan has become a breeding ground for new and more dangerous variants of the virus, with all five of the CDC's "variants of concern" detected in the state. The B.1.1.7 variant has now been detected 1,237 times in Michigan, according to the CDC, more than any other state except Florida, which has twice the population. First appearing in Michigan on January 16, this variant had been detected 420 times by March 4, with this figure tripling in the past month.

The B.1.351 South African variant, which is 50 percent more transmissible than the wild type of the virus, has been detected seven times in Michigan since first appearing in Jackson on March 9. The two California variants, B.1.427 and B.1.429, which are roughly 20 percent more transmissible, have each been detected three times in Michigan as of March 31, the same day the state's first P.1 Brazilian variant appeared in Bay County.

Despite these enormous dangers, Michigan's Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer refuses to implement any public health measures to contain the pandemic, recently stating, "You don't have a policy problem in Michigan. You have a compliance, mobility and variant problem and that's why vaccines are so important."

In Massachusetts, children and teens also account for the largest number of new COVID-19 infections in the last two weeks. The state now has the fifth-highest number of recorded B.1.1.7 cases in the US. Last week, there were 801 new cases reported among students and 244 among school staff, while the state is pressing ahead with resuming fully in-person learning at all elementary schools by May 3. Russell Johnston, senior associate commissioner at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, absurdly stated, "The school numbers going

up does not mean that schools are not safe. In fact, schools are very safe."

The full scale of the long-term impacts stemming from school reopenings is not yet known, but this will leave deep scars on society and an entire generation. Potentially tens of thousands more families will be devastated as children continue to transmit the virus to their parents.

A study published in *JAMA Pediatrics* on Monday estimates that between 37,300–43,000 children have lost at least one parent due to the pandemic. The study's authors note, "Children who lose a parent are at elevated risk of traumatic grief, depression, poor educational outcomes, and unintentional death or suicide, and these consequences can persist into adulthood." This underscores the hypocrisy of all politicians who falsely claim to be opening schools out of concern for the mental health of students.

Furthermore, millions of children may suffer from long-term complications associated with COVID-19. A recent study from the UK found that 10–15 percent of children younger than 16 infected with COVID-19 still had at least one symptom five weeks later.

Any claim that this disaster could not have been predicted, or that schools were not expected to be sources for COVID-19 transmission, is belied by the repeated warnings made by the *World Socialist Web Site*. Throughout the past year, no other outlet has so consistently warned of the dangers posed by reopening schools or fought to arm educators and the working class with a scientific understanding of the pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Parties throughout the world have worked with educators, parents, students and workers in other industries to form networks of rank-and-file committees to oppose the homicidal policies of the ruling class. With the pandemic threatening to kill millions more people globally, it is essential that these committees be expanded in every country and that they popularize the call for general strike action to close all schools and nonessential workplaces and provide economic security to all workers affected until the pandemic is fully contained.



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