

One month after schools reopened, Pennsylvania enters fourth surge of pandemic

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The coronavirus continues to spread through Pennsylvania at an alarming rate, with the state now recording nearly 5,000 cases a day, double the rate a month ago. An average of 40 people are dying across the state each day, and the surge of new cases portends a new wave of deaths in the coming weeks. The number of hospitalizations has doubled since mid-March to almost 3,000, 20 percent of which are in intensive care units (ICUs).

This rapid rise in cases and hospitalizations takes place roughly a month after schools reopened in Philadelphia and throughout the state, and is occurring despite the ramping up of vaccinations. More than 42 percent of Pennsylvanians have received their first shot and 25 percent are fully vaccinated. However, there are still millions of people who are vulnerable to infection.

Under these conditions, the spread of more contagious and deadly variants is particularly concerning. An estimated one-third of all COVID-19 cases in Pennsylvania are caused by a variant strain, and 28 percent of cases are caused by the B.1.1.7 UK variant. With limited resources for genome sequencing, the true prevalence of the UK variant is likely much higher. The largest group of those infected has reduced in age to those 45-64, and the UK variant has shown a proclivity for infecting young people aged 5-17.

Despite the fact that Pennsylvania has entered a fourth wave of the pandemic, state officials have explicitly stated their intention to continue the relaxation of standard public health measures.

Alison Beam, Pennsylvania's acting health secretary, said the state did not have plans to impose new lockdowns. She encouraged people to wear masks, social distance and get vaccinated, but refused to acknowledge the threat of a new wave, saying, "At this stage, our hospitals have not indicated to us that they are overrun or that they foresee being overrun. That will be truly one of our key gauges of when any further mitigation effort would need to be even contemplated."

This is an act of criminal negligence, tantamount to informing a cancer patient to wait until the illness is terminal before receiving treatment.

The communications director of the Philadelphia Department of Public Health, James Garrow, acknowledged that cases were rising as restrictions were relaxed, but echoed Beam's statements. He indicated that the city would only "seriously discuss" reimposing restrictions if cases continued to rise for another month.

These state officials are promoting the ruling class policy of "herd immunity," based on letting the virus continue to spread

uncontrolled long before all Pennsylvanians are able to be fully vaccinated. Every person that is infected and dies within the next few months is a death that could have been prevented by proper public health measures.

These policies pose a serious threat in public schools in particular, which have gone through an aggressive phase of reopening over the past two months. Schools have been singled out by the Biden administration and state governors as the most critical focus in protecting the interests of the rich. Children must return to class to be warehoused so that their parents can be compelled to return to work generating profits.

One Philadelphia parent spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about her concerns on returning students to the classroom. She said, "I think we need to keep things cautious until we can figure this out. ... I am okay with school staying virtual. I know parents that previously sent their kids to school knowing they were sick."

While Pennsylvania does not collect data on COVID-19 outbreaks in schools, the emergence of schools as the primary source of outbreaks in Michigan, the new epicenter of the pandemic in the US, demonstrates the threat in Pennsylvania schools. In Philadelphia, two schools have been forced to temporarily close due to outbreaks, and at least 126 infections have occurred since schools reopened in March, with many others throughout the state.

A high school in the Boyertown Area School District closed for just one day after seven students tested positive between April 5 and April 9. Penns Valley Area School District also closed their elementary and high schools last week after multiple cases were reported. Both schools reopened Monday under new state guidance that reduces the amount of time that a school must remain closed following an outbreak to just a few days.

Most schools have confined school reopenings to elementary and middle schools, but Scranton School District is the largest district to return high school students to in-person class. On Monday, just under half of the district's high school students returned for in-person instruction. High school class structures will present new challenges to teachers and staff and potentially accelerate the rate of infections, which have totaled 30 students and staff since April 1.

These outbreaks are occurring at the same time that school districts are planning to host in-person summer schools, which is also being pushed aggressively by the Biden administration. Pittsburgh has already identified 1,500 students who would qualify

to attend, with a potential further 3,000 students who could enroll.

Some of the charter schools in Philadelphia have also begun drafting a similar plan. According to teachers, the district is attempting to entice staff with a promise of double pay if they agree to teach in-person for the summer. This plan comes after attempts by the school board to reopen the schools were thwarted by teachers who organized opposition to the plan. Fearing the independent organization of teachers, the district backed down and reversed its decision.

Officials present the summer schools as offering students a chance to make up for lost learning during online instruction, but given the current trajectory of new cases, schools will be highly unsafe in the summer. Children under the age of 16 are not likely to be eligible for vaccination until late summer or the fall.

Pennsylvania is also leading the nation in reducing the distance between students from six feet to three. Even before the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) approved this guideline, schools in Pennsylvania began implementing the shorter distance.

Teachers throughout the state reacted with outrage after American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten voiced approval of the shorter distance.

The Philadelphia teacher commented, "I listen to the media quite a bit, and I've heard many, many references to three feet in school. But I don't hear any medical rationale for why that has been changed. Nor have I heard any medical evidence as to why three feet would be appropriate in schools, but not in other social gatherings.

"The fact that the union leadership, which claims to be for workers and the kids we teach, has affirmed something about which I have heard zero evidence, is an objective, irrefutable demonstration that they are not for the students and they are not for the teachers.

"This is just like police departments that won't show the bodycam video. It is irrefutable proof that they don't work for you. In a similar fashion, this is a public declaration by the union that they don't work for you."

Another Pennsylvania teacher added, "This doesn't surprise me. They have no intention of fixing this for anybody. They are the firemen for the ruling class, putting out fires to keep people in line."

A teacher from Ohio commented, "To me this ties into Biden's claim that children do not catch COVID. We know this is complete nonsense, it's a complete lie to everything that we have seen, including the materials published on the WSWs. Both of these claims go hand-in-hand to downplay the severity of this crisis upon our children and our schools."

The pandemic has also resulted in staffing issues in Pittsburgh. The Pittsburgh School District has reported that a shortage of school bus drivers has resulted in a deficit of 1,300 seats affecting 30 schools. According to the district, they need at least 200 drivers by May 3 to accommodate the number of students who use district transportation, and at least 350 are needed by the fall when the district plans to be fully in-person.

The shortage of drivers is a result of the pandemic, with many drivers choosing to leave the profession in search of more stable

employment or to stay home with family. Many have also cited concerns for their health and safety due to the risk of infection.

Problems with staffing will continue to plague Pennsylvania schools after the end of the pandemic as districts face revenue losses.

A recent report by Good Jobs First found that tax breaks for real estate development companies across the country are costing schools an estimated \$2.37 billion a year. The district with the single largest loss is Philadelphia, which is losing an estimated \$112 million a year, or \$800 per student. These funds have been concentrated in already wealthy neighborhoods, with just 7 percent of properties receiving 50 percent of the tax abatement benefits.

Issues with budgets and school funding will inevitably force teachers and staff into struggle with their districts as they fight for better funding and wages. Last week, 900 teachers in Scranton, Pennsylvania, voted overwhelmingly to go on strike.

Scranton Federation of Teachers (SFT) President Rosemary Boland said that Scranton teachers "would like to go on strike right now. They're outraged. They're fed up. They're tired. They're tired of being taken for granted. They're just plain tired."

While posturing as oppositional, the union will do everything possible to dissipate teachers' anger and keep them isolated should a strike develop. When the previous contract expired in 2017, teachers voted to strike but the union did nothing, forcing them to work for the past four years without a contract. Teachers are prepared to fight for tens of thousands of dollars in back pay and pay raises that have been delayed for years, but this cannot be won through the pro-corporate union, which is beholden to the AFT, its state affiliate and the Democratic Party.

It is critical that Scranton teachers join and help build the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee as a genuine fighting organization, independent of the unions and both big business parties. This committee has opposed the unsafe reopening of schools throughout the past year, and is fighting to defend the public and save lives. Sign up today to get involved!



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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