

Study from Omaha, Nebraska shows vast failure to detect COVID-19 in schools

Harvey Simpkins
28 April 2021

A recent study conducted in three Omaha, Nebraska, public schools shows that the vast majority of COVID-19 cases in K-12 schools are likely going undetected. The study, overseen by the University of Nebraska Medical Center, found that infection rates in the three schools were almost six times higher for students and two-and-a-half times higher for staff than what was recorded through self-initiated tests and reporting.

The authors also found that “when compared to conventional reporting in our setting (passive case finding), our results suggest that as many as 9 in 10 student COVID-19 cases and 7 in 10 staff COVID-19 cases may be missed by conventional reporting mechanisms.”

The study, released on April 17, involved weekly saliva polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing at two middle schools and a high school over a five-week period from November 9 to December 11, 2020. PCR testing is more reliable than rapid antigen tests, as it detects the genetic material specific to the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus.

Almost 3,000 saliva samples were tested from 773 asymptomatic staff and students, with 46 positive cases found. The case rate detected by PCR testing for students was 70/1000, while only 12/1000 were detected through conventional reporting. For staff, 53/1000 were detected by PCR, and only 21/1000 were detected by conventional reporting.

Significantly, the three schools studied were only operating at one-quarter of normal classroom densities. As the authors note, “our results may underestimate the risk of in-school transmission for schools operating at more normal density.”

Also, at the time of this research, Omaha Public Schools had a policy of six-foot social distancing. The

CDC has subsequently revised its social distancing guidance in schools, without any basis in science, from six feet to three feet. The Omaha study also established higher community risk of the spread of the coronavirus in zip codes close to the three studied schools, indicating that schools are helping to drive the spread.

The Omaha study confirms the findings of a study conducted by the INOVA Health System, Virginia Department of Health and George Mason University. The Virginia study, published in March, found that 8.5 percent of children aged 0 to 19 tested positive for COVID-19 antibodies, nearly double the rate in adults. The Virginia study tested 1,038 children in northern Virginia from July to October 2020. Of those children testing positive, 66 percent “had no history of symptoms of COVID-19 infection, which highlights the silent or asymptomatic infection in children, and subsequent risk of transmission of infection to others,” the authors wrote.

In a press release discussing the findings, Dr. Rebecca Levorson, one of the authors of the study, explained: “Nearly a quarter of the U.S. population is children, and as they may represent a larger proportion of SARS-CoV-2 disease than we previously thought, we need to recognize that children will continue to be infected with and possibly asymptotically spread this disease. As we continue to fight this pandemic, we need to consider ways to protect them and others by using the tools we have available to us, including masking, social distancing and vaccination.”

The Nebraska study is further confirmation that schools are a potential major source of outbreaks and that they must be closed in regions where the coronavirus is not contained. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has been reporting for weeks, Michigan is now the epicenter of yet another wave of the pandemic,

fueled by school reopenings. The state's own statistics continue to show K-12 schools as the number one source of COVID-19 outbreaks, with 42 separate incidents last week alone.

Although there are no systematic efforts to track coronavirus outbreaks in schools throughout the United States, states that provide data show a similar trend as Michigan. In Colorado, schools account for the largest source of outbreaks, with 90 active outbreaks. The state has seen a 25 percent rise in school outbreak locations in a week. Minnesota's data shows that 241 schools have had an outbreak of at least five cases in school buildings in the last 28 days.

In Washington D.C., for the period July 31, 2020 to April 21, 2021, the top two settings for coronavirus outbreaks are child care/day care (43 outbreaks) and school buildings (38 outbreaks), while the fourth highest setting is in universities. In Maryland, there are currently 43 schools across the state reporting ongoing COVID-19 outbreaks.

Internationally, children are fueling new waves of the coronavirus, especially the more contagious B.1.1.7 variant, first identified in the United Kingdom and now the dominant strain in Michigan. From Montreal to British Columbia and across Europe, school reopenings have helped lead to a dramatic increase in infections, especially among children. In the US, 3,711,075 children have officially been infected with COVID-19 as of April 22, with the results of the Omaha study suggesting that the true figure could be multiple factors higher.

Epidemiologist Eric Feigl-Ding has recently shown that in Germany children have the highest rate of COVID-19 among all age groups. Similar trends are being seen in Sweden and Italy, where there have been massive increases in pediatric cases over the last few months fueled by the British variant.

Establishing the close link between school reopenings and the surge in cases, Feigl-Ding has explained that cases surged faster in teachers and students than the general public in Quebec, before the winter holidays. When schools closed for the holidays, cases plummeted. Once winter break ended, school cases rose again. The *World Socialist Web Site* recently analyzed the same phenomenon in Michigan, with school closures for spring break leading to a temporary drop in cases.

Contrary to the clear and unambiguous evidence that schools continue to drive the spread of the coronavirus, the Democrats and teachers unions continue to do all they can to facilitate the full reopening of schools across the country. Pushed by President Joe Biden, who infamously told a child on CNN in February that "kids don't get COVID very often," school systems across the country are pressing to fully reopen. According to *Burbio.com*, which tracks school reopenings, only 5.6 percent of K-12 students are now attending virtual-only schools, while almost two-thirds of students attend schools that offer fully in-person instruction.

The most recent study on Omaha schools confirms yet again that schools must be closed as part of an overall public health strategy to bring the coronavirus under control. The *World Socialist Web Site* has been consistent throughout the pandemic in opposing the reopening push and demanding that schools be shut down, with full economic security provided to all families and ample resources invested in remote learning.

In opposition to the trade unions, which throughout the past year have stifled opposition to the unsafe reopenings, teachers are forming Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees across the country and internationally as the only means to fight back against the deadly pandemic. We urge teachers, students and parents to sign up today to join and help build a committee in your district or state.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact