

# As cases of coronavirus variants rise, Nebraska goes ahead with ceasing mask mandates and continuing in-person learning

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Even though only 39 percent of Nebraska's population has been vaccinated, the state's government is rolling back mask mandates. In Omaha, the mayor and city council made no moves to extend the mask mandate, which will end on May 25. This is even as Douglas County Health Director Dr. Adi Pour expressed concerns. Local news station KETV reported, "Pour said that she thinks the council made the right decision, but would have preferred the mandate to last another month. She added she's a little bit worried about summer events like the College World Series and swim trials. She's worried visitors will bring variants into the community."

More deadly and transmissible variants have already started popping up in Nebraska. In March, the Douglas County health department reported that over 100 positive cases of COVID-19, with a significant number of them the B.1.1.7 variant, were traced to an Omaha daycare; and that a possible second outbreak tied to "an event" was under investigation. Earlier this month, the first case of the B.1.617, or India, COVID-19 variant, was verified through the Nebraska Public Health Lab.

Yet, as the *Omaha World Herald* reports, Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts said that he expects the state will have "no need for pandemic restrictions in schools next fall." If Ricketts and the rest of Nebraska's leadership, like the rest of the ruling class, get their way, schools will be reopening full in-person in the fall with no masks, even though no vaccines have yet been approved for children under 12. The drive to reopen schools has never been based on science, but rather the need to force parents to return to work in order to feed corporate profits and the stock market, which has risen to astounding new heights during the pandemic.

Over 200,000 people have been diagnosed with COVID-19 in Nebraska and over 2,000 are confirmed

fatalities. It is likely the numbers are much higher, given the level of underreporting, as noted by the University of Nebraska Medical Center's recent study on school transmission. As the WSWs reported, "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."

Dr. James Lawler, a director of the University of Nebraska Medical Center's Global Center for Health Security, has stated that he believes opening schools contributed to spread. He was quoted by the *Star Herald* as saying, "I'm certainly not saying that schools were the only factor driving transmission in communities—clearly that is not the case—but I think schools were important, and probably much more important than most people realized," Lawler said. "The big outbreaks behave like dry brushfires, while transmission in schools is like a peat-bog fire, where it's underground, slowly spreading..." he explained.

Even in the face of the new variants and the death of a custodian in Omaha's Millard School district, Nebraska's *Star Herald* reports that most education leaders "say reopening was the right decision." This article keeps in line with local reporting's focus on "loss of learning" as opposed to the risk to the health and safety of teachers and students.

The *Omaha World-Herald* recently reported on the rates of failure for remote-learners and barely noted the many factors that went into remote learning not being as successful for graduation rates as in-person learning. As the WSWs noted in its article on the sabotage of remote learning, "Educators were plunged into distance teaching and mostly left to

completely redesign their lesson plans with no assistance. Teachers are consumed with fixing technical problems and managing large classes, while in many cases being directed to impose punitive policies for student ‘absenteeism.’”

These issues were no less pressing in Nebraska. In one of the state’s largest school districts, Omaha Public Schools, the teachers were told they were going to have to teach in-person, and last-minute switched to remote learning last August after students, teachers and parents pushed back, starting a petition that stated, “Let us be clear, we want students to have the ability to return to school full time and in person, which is why we support taking classes fully remote until the city of Omaha shows that they can control the spread of COVID-19. Until the city is willing and able to protect students, teachers, and families, it is not safe to return to school.”

Yet, by September, with test positivity rates no lower, students and teachers were forced back into a 3/2 hybrid model. Then, by February, with Omaha’s positivity rates hovering (officially) around 25 percent, educators, parents and students were told they were going to transition to fully in-person.

Omaha Public Schools plans on pushing ahead with a robust summer school session, just as the mask mandate will be expiring.

The dangerous and callous actions of Nebraska’s leaders is in-line with how the ruling class has handled reopenings across the US and the world. American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten called for the full reopening of all US schools in the fall. Teachers and other workers, however, are not complacently accepting these conditions. Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees have been forming and speaking out against the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s premature call to let up on the use of masks, to stop the spread of COVID-19 through schools and workplaces and save lives. We call on Nebraska teachers to establish rank-and-file committees at their schools. Get involved today.



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