

Chicago school officials announce mandatory in-person attendance in the fall

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At a school board meeting on May 26, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) officials announced plans to require full-time, in-person learning starting in the fall, with few exceptions. The move to end remote learning in Chicago and throughout the state, even while large numbers of parents continue to keep their children learning safely at home, is part of a national campaign to declare an end to the pandemic and send both children and workers back to unsafe buildings to increase the wealth of the superrich.

A report in the *Chicago Sun-Times* about the plans, which have not been finalized, suggests in-person attendance will be mandatory for all students, except for those who are “medically fragile and immunocompromised.” This is in line with comments made in early May by CPS CEO Janice Jackson, who said she was “looking to the state ... to get us back to normal from a schooling perspective where everyone is expected to go to school in a brick-and-mortar building every single day unless there are extenuating circumstances, medical circumstances, that prevent them from coming to school.”

Orders from the state to reopen came on May 19, as the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) voted unanimously to endorse a declaration by State Superintendent Carmen Ayala, which stated, “Beginning with the 2021-22 school year, all schools must resume fully in-person learning for all student attendance days,” with only those children, who remain ineligible to receive a vaccine and remain “under a quarantine order by a local public health department or the Illinois Department of Public Health,” being granted the option of remote learning.

Given the speed at which all levels of government around the country have been shedding public health measures, it is unlikely any such quarantine orders will remain. This means unvaccinated children, even those under 12, who are not expected to be eligible until September at the earliest, will be expected to attend, putting themselves, their family and friends at risk of contracting COVID-19. As CPS spokesman James Gherardi commented following the ISBE resolution, “This is what the district has been working towards, and

there seems to be a consensus at all levels of government that opening schools full-time in the fall is a critical priority.”

Other school districts throughout Illinois have followed suit, including U-46 in Elgin, the second largest in the state with around 36,000 students. Officials there plan to require parents to produce signed statements from a medical provider for their children to qualify for remote learning. At the board meeting which approved these plans, board member Melissa Owens questioned the decision, noting, “Where I’m getting a little tripped up is the fact that we still will have a sizable population coming back on August 16 that most likely will not have access to the vaccine.”

Indeed, while the state has been touting the fact that 67 percent of adults have received at least one dose of a vaccine, only 41.6 percent of the total population of Illinois is fully vaccinated, according to IDPH, owing to the low rate of vaccination among children especially. In Illinois, 16 year olds only became eligible to receive the vaccine in mid-April and those ages 12-15 in mid-May.

The danger remains that a return to “normal” activities without a global plan for vaccination and suppression of the disease will allow new and more dangerous coronavirus variants to circulate and further mutate, with the potential that new variants develop that are entirely resistant to the vaccines.

The consensus to reopen is by no means limited to Illinois. It has been just three weeks since May 13, the day the CDC lifted its masking recommendations, and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten delivered a speech stating, “There is no doubt: Schools must be open. In person. Five days a week.” Since then, school districts around the country, including the very largest and those hit hard by COVID-19, have announced full-time, in-person learning for the fall.

Chicago’s announcement was paralleled by similar decisions in both New York City and Los Angeles, the two largest school districts in the country. As in those cities, Chicago officials have struggled with low attendance

numbers driven largely by the reluctance of working class parents to send their children into unsafe environments. According to CPS data, only 22 percent of students attended in-person classes the week of April 19, while in New York City, 61 percent are still attending remotely. In Los Angeles, the parents of roughly 70 percent of children kept their kids learning safely at home.

In New York City, Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio pointed to the economic considerations underlying the reopening, saying, “You can’t have a full recovery without full strength schools, everyone back, sitting in those classrooms, kids learning again.” In New York, students will not be given an easy option to continue remote learning, while educators and staff will no longer be granted accommodations to work remotely.

In Detroit Public Schools, Superintendent Nikolai Vitti quoted Weingarten in announcing the district’s reopening plans, and said that students receiving special education services, those with attendance issues and English language learners, among others, would be required to attend in-person, according to *Chalkbeat*. Even though students receiving these services are more likely to have medically vulnerable or unvaccinated family members and social contacts, only those the district deems less at risk of academic failure, that is, more well-off students, will be allowed to continue learning remotely.

One goal of many of the districts announcing an end to remote learning is to reduce staffing challenges and cut additional costs relating to online education. This attitude comes across clearly in the statement by New Orleans Public Schools Superintendent Henderson Lewis Jr., who announced recently, “When our schools reopen for the 2021-22 school year, our schools will not be required to offer distance learning, except in very specific situations, such as quarantines.” He admitted, “But overall, our expectation is that schools serve students at school and that families who have not returned come back in August.”

California’s second largest school district, San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD), is also planning for a return to full-time, in-person learning in the fall, as are many other districts in the area, including Sweetwater Union High School District. SDUSD School Board President Richard Barrera noted that many mitigation measures may be scrapped by the time the school year starts, saying, “Those guidelines around mask-wearing, around distancing, around small cohorts, all of those measures that are in place right now, may look differently in the fall.”

One of the most important considerations for the ruling class in pushing the return to school is to boost the labor force participation rate, which during the pandemic had plummeted to levels not seen since the mid-1970s. Total non-

agricultural employment in Illinois, for example, totaled just 5.7 million in April of this year, compared with 6.2 million in April 2019, a loss of 500,000 jobs. Additionally, the unemployment rate remains at 7.1 percent, nearly twice the pre-pandemic figure of 3.7 percent in March 2020. The reopening of schools to serve as child care is a crucial part of the plans to reopen the wider economy and keep the profits flowing to the billionaires.

Following the lead of Weingarten, teachers union officials at CPS and elsewhere have made no move to oppose the plans to reopen schools for fully in-person learning. Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) President Jesse Sharkey has limited himself to perfunctory calls for the district to set a target for student vaccinations and extend outreach efforts, saying, “We can’t paper over the fact that CPS parents and students are not getting vaccinated—at least not at the rates we need.”

The reality is that Sharkey and the CTU have worked hand in glove with the school district to carry out the reopening of schools. In March, it was revealed that Sharkey himself was involved in crafting the district messages to CPS families and educators regarding reopening plans and had even proposed wording changes to the letter the district sent out.

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was formed in January as a genuinely democratic organization of rank-and-file educators, parents and students, independent of the CTU and the Democratic Party. We call on all Chicago educators, parents and students to join this committee today and fight to put a stop to the unsafe reopening plans.



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