

As cases of COVID-19 among children rise, Nebraska goes ahead with in-person learning

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Nebraska schools pushed forward with plans to reopen this week, even as COVID-19 cases among children under 19 have continued to climb. The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services noted an increase in cases for children ages 5 to 17, with 15 percent of positive tests belonging to that age group in late July.

In Omaha, Nebraska's most populous city, the county health director reported in August that the number of cases among children under 19 had tripled within a couple of weeks and that "they comprised 26% of all COVID cases in the county—the largest of any age group." Contributing to this is the fact that only 31 percent of children 5 to 17 in Nebraska are vaccinated. The *Omaha World Herald* also reported, "for 16- to 29-year-olds, the rates ranged from 15% fully vaccinated as of Thursday in two largely rural districts to 47% in Douglas County," where Omaha is located.

A clearer picture of the level of transmission in the state and its schools is made difficult by Republican Governor Pete Ricketts' criminal decision to discontinue public reporting of COVID-19 statistics, including case numbers and vaccinations, for counties with populations under 20,000.

Of Nebraska's 93 counties, only 17 have at least 20,000 people. While those 17 counties make up roughly 80 percent of Nebraska's population, this will compromise the ability to track the spread of the disease in rural communities across the state. Nebraska has also ceased its Test Nebraska program, one that provided easily accessible free testing to state residents.

There is no unified policy in the state's school systems over basic safety measures such as masking. Omaha Public Schools (OPS) has a mask mandate for students and staff on school grounds. However, it has not specified the kinds of masks that should be used,

provided for proper ventilation in schools or mandated vaccinations for those eligible. Remote teaching and learning is no longer even an option for students.

Even the mask mandate contains major exceptions, "such as outdoor activities or while eating or drinking," which will contribute to more infections under conditions where the Delta variant can spread far more easily outdoors and in brief encounters, such as passing an infected individual on the sidewalk.

Other large school districts in the Omaha area, such as Millard Public Schools (MPS), where a staff member died in 2020, are not requiring masks. Millard Public Schools is the third-largest district in the state.

Omaha TV station KETV reported that a cluster of cases has already been identified in MPS' Montclair Elementary only five days into the school year. The district's response, however, has been to temporarily close down only the classroom, not the whole school. There is no mask mandate in place and, "In an email to KETV, a Millard Public Schools spokesperson said students will have to test negative to return to school after eight days. If they choose not to test, they can return on day 10. They will learn asynchronously in the interim."

Union reps for OPS and Millard have been largely silent on the reopenings. Tim Royers, the president of the Millard Education Association, has said only that the majority of the teachers he represents support the use of masks. According to the *Omaha World Herald*, Royers said at a recent school board meeting, "I want all of our kids to be safe. ... There is not a straight path out of this pandemic. Sometimes it's two steps forward and one step back, and this is one of those moments."

This is perfectly in line with the national policy of the American Federation of Teachers under President Randi Weingarten, and the National Education

Association under its president Becky Pringle, who are spearheading the reopening even as pediatric ICUs continue to fill up nationwide. As Randi Weingarten infamously declared recently, “The number one priority is to get kids back in school.” In other words, the teachers unions support the corporate campaign to reopen schools in order to send parents back to work making profits for Wall Street.

Within the last two weeks, two children in the US, a teenager in South Carolina and 13-year-old Mckayla Robinson in Raleigh, Mississippi have both died of COVID-19. Among those who survive, however, studies have shown the short and long-term effects of the virus include a loss of IQ between 2 and 7 points, on par with lead poisoning and stroke.



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