

Unsafe school reopenings in US fuel surge of COVID-19 among children

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The reopening of schools throughout the United States is fueling a massive surge of COVID-19 cases among children.

The US reported 180,000 child COVID-19 cases in the week ending August 19, a 50 percent increase in just one week, according to the latest report from the American Academy of Pediatrics. There were 120,000 child cases the prior week, and less than 10,000 just two months ago.

Even worse, 24 children died of COVID-19 in the same period, twice the previous record set in the week ending August 5.

The reopening of schools, more than 60 percent of which have already resumed classes, has led to outbreaks in K-12 institutions throughout the country.

Metro Atlanta school districts have reported thousands of cases of COVID-19 among students and staff just weeks into the school year. Gwinnett County, Georgia's largest school district, reported over 800 active cases of the virus Friday. That is up from 470 active cases in the district last week.

COVID-19 cases have exploded in Mississippi schools. Nearly 6,000 students have tested positive for the disease, 30 times more than in the previous semester. There have been 1,496 infections among teachers and staff, a six-fold increase over last semester.

Within less than a week after the August 11 reopening in New Mexico, schools in Albuquerque, Belen, Carlsbad, Los Lunas and Roswell have had major outbreaks. According to the state Environment Department, 109 schools around the state recorded at least two COVID-19 cases, including students, staff and faculty.

In the four days since the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second largest district in the US with over 600,000 students, reopened last Monday, outbreaks have taken place throughout the city. According to data released Thursday by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, 118 students and staff tested positive in the 24 hours from Tuesday to Wednesday morning. Of these, 107 were K-12 students, who were on campuses during that time.

The growth of COVID-19 cases among children is only

the most visible expression of the spread of the pandemic throughout the country.

Daily new cases have reached 150,000, a 10-fold increase over the past two months. In states throughout the country, hospitals are filled to capacity as the number of hospitalized COVID-19 patients hit 85,000 last week, a six-fold increase since June. And most troubling of all, over 1,000 people died on Friday, a quadrupling of the daily deaths compared to two months ago.

Last week, Florida set an all-time record for COVID-19 deaths, reporting an astounding 1,486 new deaths. One person in the state is dying of COVID-19 every 7 minutes.

Kansas Governor Laura Kelly said more people in the state were admitted to the hospital on Wednesday than any other single day on record. She added that six of the state's largest hospitals are at 100 percent capacity for ICU beds.

Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards said the state has seen an "astronomical" number of COVID-19 cases during the latest surge. The governor said Friday, "28 percent of all the new cases that we're reporting are in children zero to 17."

Katie O'Neal, chief medical officer of Our Lady of the Lake Children's Hospital in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, summed up the disaster facing young people. "We never saw that amount of young death before," she told MSNBC. "What we're seeing today is a much younger population. ... We have teenagers coming into the ICU to tell their parents goodbye. We have teenagers FaceTiming with their parents to tell them goodbye."

"We have people stacking up for care which we never had to do," O'Neal added, warning that hospitals are running out of beds and staff. "People don't get the care they need, and people are dying."

In the face of this disaster, the Biden administration has demanded the full return to in-person instruction. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said last week that "our priority must be" to "return to school in person." Replying to parents opposing the reopening of schools under unsafe conditions, Cardona said, "But the reality is, if we follow the mitigation

strategies, we can keep our children safe.”

The Biden administration speaks for the entire US political establishment. All factions of the ruling class—from Republicans, who are demanding an end to every mitigation measure, to Democrats, who claim that reopening can be carried out safely—are opposed to the measures that are necessary to eradicate the virus, including the shutdown of schools.

The Democrats are working closely with the trade unions and in particular the American Federation of Teachers, which is bankrolling a campaign to promote school reopenings. AFT President Randi Weingarten has declared that “the number one priority is to get kids to be back in school.”

This has been accompanied by a massive campaign in the corporate media. The *New York Times* published an editorial on Sunday (“The School Kids Are Not Alright”) condemning local governments for being too slow in reopening schools to in-person learning.

The *Times* cynically framed its demand that all schools reopen as necessary for children. “The resulting learning setbacks [from school closures] range from grave for all groups of students to catastrophic for poor children,” it claims. But what about the consequences for children who get sick and die? This is of no concern to the *Times*. While denouncing “those who have minimized the impact of school shutdowns,” the *Times* does not even mention in its long editorial the surge in cases among children. Nor does it note the studies documenting the long-term impact on children of COVID-19, including on mental health and cognitive development.

These same arguments are being used by capitalist governments throughout the world to reject the necessary measures to stop the deadly spread of the pandemic. The all-out campaign to reopen schools defies the recommendations of scientists, who have warned that it is entirely unsafe while the disease is spreading uncontrolled.

“If we have transmission in the community, it’s not safe to reopen schools, full stop,” said Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz, a developmental biologist and a researcher at the University of Calgary. “Unless we have no transmission, we shouldn’t reopen in-person schools.”

Gasperowicz made these remarks at the online event, “For a global strategy to stop the pandemic and save lives!” sponsored by the *World Socialist Web Site* on Sunday. Together with Dr. Michael Baker, a public health physician and professor at the University of Otago Wellington Department of Public Health, and Dr. Yaneer Bar-Yam, founding president of the New England Complex Systems Institute, Gasperowicz outlined an eradication strategy for ending the pandemic through aggressive public health

measures.

“If we combine both vaccines and public health measures ... we can stomp it out,” Gasperowicz said.

If these measures are not taken, Baker warned, “you’re going to have essentially several million children and young people infected over the next few months. ... Just the sheer number of children, young people being infected means that we’re going to have a huge burden of preventable illness in young people, and some of this may be permanent.”

The current surge of the “Delta” variant of COVID-19—together with every other variant that has yet to emerge—must be stopped through an emergency program to eradicate COVID-19. This means the shutdown schools and nonessential production, with full compensation for workers, and a multi-trillion-dollar emergency public health program, including mass testing, contact tracing and quarantining.

But this requires a mobilization of the working class on a politically independent basis through the formation of rank-and-file committees at workplaces, schools and neighborhoods. As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote last week in the statement, “The eradication of COVID-19 is the only way to stop the pandemic”:

The implementation of the eradication strategy requires the development of a powerful international and unified mass movement of the working class. Only a mass movement that is not driven by the profit motive and fettered to the obsessive pursuit of personal wealth can generate the social force required to compel a change in policy.

At every stage of this pandemic, the policy of the ruling class has proven catastrophic. Amidst a new resurgence, the development of an independent movement of the working class, in the United States and throughout the world, is the urgent task. The lives of millions of people, including countless children, are at stake!



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