US school reopenings set to infect tens of millions of children with COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has once again spiraled out of control across the United States, with 190,536 new cases and 1,304 new deaths officially tracked on Friday, the highest figures since January and March, respectively. As the highly transmissible Delta variant has ripped through workplaces, schools and homes across the country, there are now more than 100,000 people hospitalized with COVID-19 in the US, with nearly 25,000 in intensive care units (ICUs).

Under these conditions, the drive to fully reopen all of the country's schools and send over 40 million unvaccinated children into tightly-packed and poorly ventilated classrooms takes on a sociopathic character. It is already clear that this policy, pushed by the entire political establishment, the corporate media and the teachers' unions, is disastrous and will lead to the infection and potential long-term suffering of millions of innocent children.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), more than 180,000 children tested positive for COVID-19 from August 12 to August 19, accounting for more than 20 percent of all new COVID-19 cases that week--a more than 20-fold increase over the same figure in early June. It is widely understood in the scientific community that this figure will skyrocket in the coming weeks, even in areas where mitigations such as mask-wearing and testing are more prevalent.

Data on infections in schools is not compiled nationally, with local and state agencies doing so in a haphazard manner or not at all. According to a compilation of local news reports from 19 states conducted by *The Hill*, over 90,000 children have already had to quarantine or isolate at home due to infection or possible exposure to the virus since the start of the fall semester. In addition, over 60,000 educators and school staff are similarly in isolation or quarantine.

The situation is most dire in the South, which has the lowest vaccination rates in the US and where many large school districts have already reopened without mask mandates. In Atlanta, Georgia, more than 23,000 students and staff have gone into quarantine in the first few weeks of the school year. In Mississippi, at least 65,500 K-12 students have already had to quarantine due to infection or exposure, according to the *Mississippi Free Press.*

Tragically, the surge in child infections is leading to a corresponding surge in deaths, with the AAP reporting that a record 24 children died during the week ending August 19. On August 25, an unnamed child under 5 years old died from COVID-19 in Mississippi. This follows the death of 13-year-old M'Kayla Robinson on August 14 and an unnamed teenager in late July, meaning that three children died across the state in just one month, as many as in the previous 17 months of the pandemic.

In Oklahoma, 13-year-old Clarence Johnson died from COVID-19 on August 19, days before he was set to begin eighth grade. The Oklahoma City Public Schools' Native American Student Services department wrote on Facebook that Clarence, who was Comanche and Kiowa, was beloved by teachers and staff for his "beautiful soul and unforgettable smile."

Over 640,000 schoolchildren in Oklahoma remain unvaccinated and at risk of contracting the virus, with the state reporting a three-day average of 64 pediatric hospitalizations for COVID-19. It is one of eight Republican-led states that have enacted bans on mask mandates or allowed parents to opt out of mandates for their children, with the others being, Arizona, Florida, Iowa, South Carolina, Tennessee and Utah.

Throughout the US, child hospitalizations have reached record numbers, with over 2,000 pediatric COVID-19 hospitalizations. In the South, in particular, pediatric ICUs are at or near capacity, with record numbers of severely ill children.

In Louisiana, Children's Hospital New Orleans has been inundated with child patients for weeks. "I have never seen our faculty look so tired or sad," Dr. Adele K. Evans, who leads the hospital's tracheostomy team, told the *New York Times*. Roughly 60 staff members at the hospital were in quarantine last week. With Category 4 Hurricane Ida making landfall Sunday, this dire situation will only become worse in the coming days.

In Democratic-led states, including New York, California and Michigan, COVID-19 cases have also risen dramatically in recent weeks and are expected to further surge as schools reopen.

New York City, the largest school district in the US with over 1.1 million students, is set to reopen on September 13, with no remote learning option provided to parents, despite the fact that the parents of over 350,000 students opted to keep their children learning safely at home throughout the 2020-21 school year. At least 14,904 students and 12,690 staff have tested positive for COVID-19 over the past year, according to the city's inadequate testing program, figures set to surge as students are packed into the city's classrooms and the Delta variant already increasing statewide cases more than 10-fold in the past two months.

In Michigan, daily case rates have risen more than 1,000 percent and hospitalizations are up 175 percent since Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer eliminated all remaining statewide

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restrictions on June 22. Hundreds of thousands of children are returning to fully in-person school in the coming days, with numerous districts across the state refusing to implement mask mandates.

Across California, thousands of students and staff have tested positive for COVID-19 and tens of thousands have gone into quarantine within days of schools reopening. In Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second-largest district in the US, with over 600,000 students, baseline testing of students and staff from August 2 to August 15 found that 3,255 students and 399 staff started the school year testing positive for COVID-19.

Beyond the growing body of real-world data proving that schools cannot reopen at present without causing a massive surge in infections, new scientific studies are underscoring this basic reality.

A study published by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Friday determined that one elementary school teacher in Marin County, California infected half of her students when she briefly took off her mask during a read-aloud of a story. The outbreak of Delta variant cases occurred on May 23, before the teacher was vaccinated, and led to further infections in another classroom at the school as well as at some students' homes.

The conditions that existed at the school in May were those that are supposed to keep children safe, according to proponents of school reopenings with "mitigations": masks were required indoors, desks were spaced six feet apart, classrooms contained portable air filters, doors and windows were kept open, and all students were kept socially distant.

Tracy Lam-Hine, an epidemiologist for the county, told the *Washington Post*, "The mask was off only momentarily, not an entire day or hours. We want to make the point that this is not the teacher's fault—everyone lets their guard down—but the thing is Delta takes advantage of slippage from any kind of protective measures."

Indeed, the fact that this huge outbreak took place in Marin, one of the wealthiest counties in the US, and under such "ideal" conditions, underscores that even the most stringent mitigation measures will not protect unvaccinated children and adults from the Delta variant. The reality in the vast majority of schools that serve students from working class families—poor ventilation, overcrowding, the use of lower-quality masks—is far more conducive to the spread of the virus.

Separately, a preprint of a scientific paper published this month estimated that in elementary schools with no masking or testing mandated, roughly 91 percent of students could become infected with COVID-19 within three months of the start of the school year, with most students infected by the end of the first month due to an exponential growth in cases.

This staggering rate of infection is reduced to roughly 49 percent of all students in schools that mandate masks but not testing, and 22 percent of students in schools with masking and testing, with infections still growing steadily in a linear fashion. Figures for middle and high schools were found to be slightly lower for each category due to the vaccination of some students. In effect, this study acknowledges that even in schools with testing and masking, cases will continually rise.

For masses of parents and educators, the school reopening drive is clearly reckless and should not continue. But for the entire political establishment, corporate media, teachers unions and official scientists, all of whom are subservient to the needs of Wall Street, schools must reopen in order to send parents back to work producing corporate profits.

Speaking on NBC's "Meet the Press" Sunday, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), Dr. Anthony Fauci, stated callously, "You're going to see more children infected. And quantitatively, since more children are infected, you're going to see more children getting hospitalized, unfortunately and that's what we're seeing." He went on to promote masking in schools as a means to protect children.

At a White House briefing Friday, CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky stated, "I want to strongly appeal to those districts that have not implemented prevention strategies, and encourage them to do the right thing to protect the children under their care. We know these multilayered mitigation strategies work."

In contrast to the claims of Fauci and Walensky, the reality in schools and the studies cited above demonstrate the bankruptcy of any "mitigation" strategy that accepts school reopenings. Rather, in order to stop the spread of COVID-19 and ultimately eradicate the virus, it is critical to close all schools and nonessential workplaces and cut off the chain of transmission.

One week ago, on August 22, the *World Socialist Web Site* hosted an online webinar with leading international scientists, as well as parents and teachers from the UK, US, Australia and Brazil, which made clear the necessity of closing schools in all countries where COVID-19 has not been eliminated. This policy and the eradication strategy necessary to stop the needless suffering and death will only be fought for by the international working class, armed with a scientific understanding of the pandemic and unified on a world scale.

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