

Democrats open Chicago Public Schools as coronavirus cases surge

Kristina Betinis
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Chicago Public Schools, the country's third largest school district with more than 340,000 students, opened in a disastrous state Monday amid a surge in coronavirus infections across the US.

At the end of last week, 1,500 children were hospitalized with coronavirus nationwide. Illinois, with a population of about 13 million, sits in the top 15 US states in terms of daily new cases, logging on average more than 4,000 each day over the last week and more than 5,100 on September 1.

On Tuesday, the city again increased advisory precautions, including new quarantine rules for travel from other states, and advised people not to travel during the Labor Day weekend with unvaccinated children.

Photos and reports from inside packed schools and classrooms indicate the district has virtually abandoned any kind of social distancing and began the school year as if there was no pandemic, let alone a rise in cases. Chaotic, dangerous conditions have long prevailed in the city's schools, but these have worsened under pandemic conditions.

On August 25, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) announced it was scrapping daily health screenings. Parents are now being asked to simply sign a form pledging to keep children home if they are sick. COVID-19 tests are reportedly available on request but are not required. CPS claims students will be three feet apart "if possible," and there is no benchmark number of positive cases set that will trigger a shutdown at the school or district level. Teachers, parents and students have all expressed concern over the lack of masks during lunch and the lack of distancing while eating.

The so-called "vaccine mandate" for school staff instituted by Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker is no mandate at all. CPS staff must either be fully

vaccinated by October 15 or submit to regular testing. Vaccinations for children over 12 years are not mandatory.

Parents have and continue to demand remote learning options and stronger health measures. Some have organized a sick-out. One parent told the school board, "Many of us want a remote learning option for our children. I would urge the board to ... keep all spring COVID safety measures at minimum."

CPS families cannot elect to place their children in remote learning as the case numbers rise. Remote learning was only formally made available to "a limited number of students who qualify as medically fragile with documented health conditions or medical needs." However, this option was not well publicized, and families who happened to find out about it reported having their applications rejected. According to CPS, the district received only 758 applications and accepted a mere 481 students.

Teachers whose students are at home quarantining are expected to teach those students online simultaneously while teaching those who are present in class.

On the first day, a school bus transportation shortage left more than 2,000 students stranded without a bus, 990 of whom are in special education, according to local media reports. Federal law requires students with disabilities have access to school transportation. Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot dodged responsibility for the systematic outsourcing of services, stating the problem is with the third-party bus operator: "It was only Friday that the notification came from those third parties that they had a shortage of drivers. That is not CPS's responsibility. We have a contract with those companies. We had an expectation that they were going to fulfill their contract. This is not on CPS. And I want that to be very clear."

In the days leading up to schools reopening, more than 70 school bus drivers resigned. Officials attributed the resignations to the vaccine mandate, but low pay, poor benefits and difficult working conditions have long been problems for drivers in the district and throughout the Chicago region. The *Sun Times* reported the district has known of a shortage of some 500 bus drivers and has rearranged routes for 14,500 students, who rely on the bus. CPS is reportedly offering \$1,000 to families up front and \$500 monthly for school travel until the bussing problems are resolved.

After blocking strike action in February to oppose reopening in the pandemic, the Chicago Teachers Union leaders are publicly wringing their hands. CTU released a bargaining update on Tuesday, clarifying that there is currently no agreement on the fall reopening, that safety is still being negotiated and conditions are currently unacceptable.

The Chicago Teachers Union (Local #1 of the American Federation of Teachers) has been indispensable in forcing teachers back to work through promoting the fiction of “safe reopening,” namely, better social distancing and a case number over which a school would be temporarily shut and quarantined. CPS leaders and Mayor Lightfoot have refused these for many months. “Safe reopening” is impossible in an environment in which children under 12 are not vaccinated and where social distancing, masking and other measures are not being implemented anywhere else in the society, let alone in schools. Democratic leaders, including Lightfoot and former CPS CEO Janice Jackson, made the absurd claim during the reopening in the spring of this year that students can only catch COVID-19 outside of school.

Far from raising any challenge to this policy, both teachers unions, the AFT and NEA, have been instrumental in reopening schools, playing down the risks, insisting it is the duty of educators to teach under any and all conditions no matter the risks, blocking collective action and intimidating and silencing teacher opposition.

But their efforts will be quickly outmatched as opposition to the bipartisan pro-business policy of “herd immunity” continues to grow. In recent days, the CTU’s social media, much like that of the United Federation of Teachers in New York, is dominated by comments from parents demanding support for remote

learning, and by teachers and aides describing the conditions in schools and demanding action. One CPS worker wrote, “I’m a room care attendant at a CPS school, and I’m crying in my car because we had 6 kids with COVID symptoms today. Parents took over the allowed time to get them.”

Scores of parents and many more teachers have been demanding answers and support from the CTU for remote learning and getting no response. Among the many statements demanding a remote option, one parent wrote: “They opened up school for the money, they don’t care about our kids. Remote learning needs to be an option for our children. Ain’t no money worth my daughter’s life.”

Some families are no doubt keeping their children home. A local news media reports an estimated 100,000 CPS students, a significant portion of the district, are unaccounted for at the start of the year.

Understanding the pandemic conditions is paramount for united action by the working class. The World Socialist Web Site’s webinar “For a global strategy to end the pandemic and save lives” explains how the virus can be eradicated through a comprehensive public health strategy , including temporary lockdowns and vaccinations.



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