

Teachers and students return to overcrowded classrooms in Oregon as COVID cases surge

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As pediatric cases rise with the full reopening of the schools across the United States, the state of Oregon in the Pacific Northwest is facing the same fate. Many school districts in Oregon, including Portland Public Schools (PPS), held their first day of school on September 1 with full in-person instruction.

Around 560,000 students and thousands of staff members will return to classrooms in the next week despite the fact that Oregon's daily case counts and hospitalizations are at the highest level since the pandemic began.

Since mid-August, there have been over 2,000 positive cases every day, according to the seven-day average data by the Oregon Health Authority (OHA), representing just under 50 cases per 100,000 people. With hospital capacity at a breaking point, especially in Southern Oregon where the Delta variant surge has been most severe, a total of 397 people died due to COVID-19. This brings the total number of deaths to 3,272.

Oregon Public Broadcasting published research from the Oregon Health and Science University, which indicates that the surge will keep rising over the next week. "We're seeing the number of people hospitalized going up at rates we've never seen before," said OHSU's Peter Graven, an associate professor of health management and policy.

Jackson County, located in Southern Oregon and including the city of Medford, reached a new record of 1,947 cases last week, according to Jackson County Public Health. This amounts to 791.1 cases per 100,000. There are 29 counties with case rates of over 300 per 100,000, including Douglas County with a case rate of 938.4. In the third week of August, Josephine County had a case rate of 1,010.9.

While the hardest-hit counties are in rural areas with low vaccination rates and no serious mitigation efforts, larger Democratic-led counties also have relatively high case rates compared to last year. Multnomah and Washington counties surrounding Portland reached 177 and 184 per 100,000 respectively by the end of the month.

To put this into perspective, the state's original school reopening plan last fall required county case rates to be no

more than 10 per 100,000 for three consecutive weeks before being allowed to let students in the classrooms. This was updated in November to allow fully in-person learning with 50 cases per 100,000 and hybrid instruction at 100 cases per 100,000 over a two-week period. According to these arbitrary benchmarks used to "safely" reopen schools last year, there is not a single major district that would be allowed to bring teachers and students back, let alone with full weeks of in-person learning.

Against all scientific and public health data, Oregon politicians are following the strategy of the American ruling class in fully reopening schools and the wider economy, accepting the infections and deaths that will come as a result.

Jackson County's middle and high school in Rogue River School District delayed reopening plans until September 7 because many staff are in quarantine, and there are not enough personnel for the schools to function. Rogue River Elementary School and South Valley Academy opened on August 30, 2021. Just a couple of other schools in Oregon are delaying opening, including the Neah-Kay-Nie school district in Tillamook County.

Portland Public Schools (PPS), the largest school district in the state with more than 50,000 students, reopened September 1 for all ages. Due to high demand for elementary students to remain online, the school began a lottery for a limited number of slots in grades 2 to 5. Those who did not get a space will be wait-listed and are expected to attend in person. There were only 500 spaces created for online learning, and as of last Sunday there were 516 enrolled and 96 on the waitlist. Salem-Keizer School District, the second largest school district, is opening on a staggered schedule next week September 7 and 8.

The Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) union, in line with the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT), has played a key role in facilitating the return to schools by suppressing active opposition among teachers and staff. PAT officials have signed various return-to-school agreements, which promote

the lie that packing kids into classrooms can be done “safely” by mandating vaccines for staff.

PAT’s latest tentative agreement with PPS advocates for social distancing of “at least three feet per student,” while the district is aiming for a lower bar of three feet “to the extent possible.” The union concedes, however, “that not all our classrooms will be able to maintain at least three feet of physical distance per student” and proposes “clear mitigation measures and full transparency for educators, students, and parents in every classroom where it is not possible.”

This deliberately vague language opens the door for the district to pack more students into each classroom. At the same time, it covers up the fact that the Delta variant is continuing to spread even if social distancing and masking are in place. This is the case in the country’s three largest school districts, New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, which all operate under statewide mask mandates.

While the mainstream media, political establishment and union bureaucrats cling onto the lie that schools can be reopened “safely,” many parents and educators have expressed fear about sending kids back into overcrowded classrooms.

“We’re just trying to do the best we can, but we’re putting kids in classes that have 25 to 32 kids in elementary. That’s way too many children and the spaces are very small,” Portland school librarian Steffanie Audel told KGW8.

With the weekly COVID-19 outbreak reports being released every Wednesday, data about new cases among students and staff are not yet available for the first days of school. However, teachers and parents are rightfully expecting the same disaster that has developed in school districts across the country, with thousands of families under quarantine due to outbreaks.

The Oregon Health Authority has reported several outbreaks in day care centers throughout Oregon in the month of August. A total of 29 centers have had outbreaks of two or more cases, all of which are currently active as of the report published September 1. Of these outbreaks, seven are of 10 or more cases. All of these are day care centers with a capacity of 16 or more children.

Children are increasingly at risk of developing severe symptoms with infection, with a growing number hospitalized and dying. Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates that Oregon has the fastest rise in pediatric cases on the West Coast, comparable to Arkansas, Indiana and South Carolina.

“As with COVID-19 cases overall, pediatric COVID-19 case counts have increased dramatically since July,” the Oregon Health Authority said in a blog post on August 19. “In total, there have been 31,394 confirmed and presumptive

cases of COVID-19 among people ages 17 and younger, which makes up about 12.7 percent of Oregon’s total COVID-19 cases.”

In any community where viral transmission is taking place, allowing people to congregate in indoor spaces like schools or restaurants will result in further infections. This process will be accelerated in many school districts where quality ventilation is impossible due to environmental conditions or the lack of up-to-date HVAC systems and windows, and where vaccination levels are low and mitigation measures are either nonexistent or not enforced.

In King County in neighboring Washington, which is considered “safer” than many counties in Oregon because 65.5 percent of people 12 and over are fully vaccinated, cases and hospitalizations among children have been climbing rapidly and straining the pediatric medical system. The county includes the Seattle Public Schools, the state’s largest with 47,000 students.

Schools should not reopen. The COVID-19 pandemic can be ended, and the deadly virus eliminated, but only if a rigorous public health strategy is pursued with a combination of mitigation measures, short-term lockdowns with full compensation for workers, and rapid vaccination on a national and world scale.

While both political parties and the trade unions defend the interests of capitalism at the expense of society, the international working class holds the power to implement a strategy to end the pandemic and save lives. Oregon educators, parents and students should join the growing national and international network of rank-and-file safety committees to fight for the necessary policies to protect lives.

This includes the immediate closure of all schools and nonessential businesses, full compensation to working parents during lockdowns, a rigorous testing and contact tracing system, an expansion of the health care system, and funding for high-quality remote instruction for all students until it is truly safe to return to classrooms.



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