

“We’re not sending our kids in to be canaries in the mine”

US parents and educators denounce school openings as COVID infections spiral out of control

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Ninety-eight percent of K-12 schools in the United States are now open for in-person instruction, leading to a spread of COVID-19 infections in schools and surrounding communities. Over 94 percent of the country is experiencing “high” levels of transmission, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and cases among children have exploded.

More than 1.2 million infections among children ages 0 to 17 have been reported in the US since July 22 when schools began reopening for the fall semester. This is roughly 20 percent of the 5,292,837 child cases since the pandemic began, according to data from the American Academy of Pediatrics. Tragically, 111 children have died since July 22, about a quarter of the 460 total childhood COVID-19 fatalities. According to the CDC, nearly 30,000 children were hospitalized in August alone.

Despite the surge in cases, hospitalizations and deaths, due to the more infectious Delta variant, the Biden administration and state and local officials from both corporate-controlled parties have doubled down on their efforts to keep schools open. The political establishment has pursued this criminal policy with the full backing of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA) and their state and local affiliates.

New York City Public Schools, the largest district in the US with 1.1 million students, began in-person instruction Monday, following a deal between Mayor Bill de Blasio and the United Federation of Teachers. According to the New York City Department of Education Daily Covid Case Map, there have already been 114 classroom closures and over 150 partial classroom closures in the first two days of instruction. There have been 218 positive cases reported this week.

Despite the already concerning numbers, infections are and will be vastly underreported due to inadequate testing, contact tracing, and quarantine protocols in the district. Testing is not mandatory in the district. Only volunteer, unvaccinated students will be randomly tested biweekly. This will result in tests for only 10 percent of unvaccinated children. This is a four-fold decrease from the number of tests administered last semester. Under the current model, hundreds, if not thousands, of infections will go undetected and unreported in the district.

“It is horrible they are making everybody go back while cases are rocketing,” a New York City special education teacher who recently took leave for non-COVID medical issues told the *World Socialist*

Web Site. “They are not quarantining people who are sick or exposed like before. They said we must have safe distancing and testing in the schools but then they do not do it.”

The protocols set up by the mayor and school officials are designed to keep the schools open no matter how severe outbreaks are. Individual schools will be closed only if there is evidence of a COVID-19 outbreak in the building, but this will be difficult to prove given a low level of testing and transparency. The district’s quarantine policy is far more lax than last year’s, and fully vaccinated staff and students in middle and high schools are exempt from needing to be quarantined if exposed to a positive case.

The same conditions exist across the US. Educators and parents are particularly concerned that school officials are providing inadequate details about outbreaks or deliberately concealing life-and-death information from them.

Steve, an educator in the Bay Area of California, said, “One teacher was recently out for about a week. I eventually found out she was out ‘for COVID.’ When she returned, she said none of the students nor the staff members she worked with had been notified that they had been in contact with someone on campus who had been infected with COVID.”

Steve continued, “One of the school substitutes shared with me that he had replaced four teachers over the last three weeks who had been out for COVID. No one had shared with him that he might be in contact with people on campus (students) who had been in contact with persons who had contracted COVID.”

Michael, a parent of two children in a school district in the San Luis Obispo area of California, said, “The local paper reported an estimated 500 cases in the district during the first month of reopening, that’s nearly as many new cases this month as all of last year.

“Our former district did not provide a remote option, so we enrolled our kids in an Independent Study program at a neighboring district. The materials are awful, worse than nothing. We’re looking for alternatives, leaning toward homeschooling as soon as the affidavit filing period opens. We are not sending our kids in to be canaries in the mine!

“Some school administrators may have good intentions, but they’re clearly not qualified to decide pandemic risks for children or society. No sane person who cares about reducing a deadly pandemic would require children to gather in schools. It increases spread, as simple as

that.”

Adding to the causes for the underreporting of cases is the delay in getting test results, low turnout for testing, positive results for individuals who are identified outside of a district testing program and therefore not reported, and inadequate contact tracing and lax quarantining protocols.

The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) relaunched its COVID-19 Dashboard on Tuesday to report cases in each school district. Parents have been in an uproar as major discrepancies have been identified across various districts. They have organized their own tracking of cases through Facebook groups.

A significant discrepancy is in Knox County Schools (KCS), one of the largest districts in the state. The TDOE dashboard shows only 300 new student cases last week in the district, but Tennessee Department of Health data shows 1,012 infections among children ages 5 to 18.

KCS parents recently received a letter from district officials which declared that the dashboard aims to “protect individual privacy.” The data does not include pre-K students or staff, it has omitted a school site due to low enrollment and included total absences without breaking down how many are COVID-related absences.

“The idea of ‘protecting privacy’ is the same canard they have been using since the beginning of COVID,” a former teacher in the district responded to the letter. “FERPA [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act] has a caveat about providing information if there is a health issue like a pandemic. The school board willfully misinterprets FERPA to avoid providing accurate COVID info. Also, lumping all absences together is pure obfuscation. They know the students who are absent because of COVID or quarantine because they are not marked absent but temporary virtual learners. It would be very easy to have two lists, one of non-COVID absences and one of ‘temporary virtual learners.’”

In addition to parents aggregating their own data on positive cases, Knox County parents have also recently organized sickouts to keep children home to protect their lives and long-term health.

A similar development has occurred in Hawaii Public Schools where a surge in childhood cases has provoked mass opposition from parents and teachers. Parents in Hawaii have also used social media to aggregate COVID-19 infections in schools and have organized an ongoing sickout to keep their children out of schools.

“Our community spread is getting out of hand, and everyone knows schools should not be open now,” a special education teacher in Hawaii told the WSWS. “I had more kids staying home in late August than I had in my classroom, and now we are being told to provide distance learning for kids who are approved for special conditions and can’t come to school. This year may be more challenging in some ways than last year.”

Noting the district’s active role in covering up the spread in schools, she said, “The State has forbidden indoor gatherings of 10 or more, and yet we have full classes of 20-30. This feels schizophrenic. There is no more COVID MOU [Memorandum of Understanding] or any kind of addendum to our collective bargaining agreement pertaining to health and safety. The interim superintendent is claiming spread isn’t happening at school, but only out in the community.”

Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the third largest district in the US with over 340,000 students, is also seeing a rise in infections. Last Thursday, CPS officials reported 2,900 students and staff members had been identified as a close contact to someone who tested positive for COVID-19. Yet according to a source close to the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), the district informed the union there were

5,665 students and 98 staff members who had potentially been exposed to the virus.

The media is blaming inadequate contact tracing for the spread. Without a doubt, tracing is inadequate and CPS officials have failed to do the bare minimum. CPS officials have repeatedly missed their deadline to roll out a testing program. The district promised that this would be in place by the start of the school year, and after several delays now says it will be ready at the end of September. So far, only three percent of students and staff have opted into the district testing program. According to CPS, only 638 tests were administered across the district last Monday.

With growing anger among educators and parents, the CTU is calling for the establishment of “guardrails” of improved safety measures and a metric for closing a school, based on a certain number of infections. However, this is just damage control from the CTU, which supported the opening of the schools based on the fiction it could be done “safely.” Last year, CTU President Jesse Sharkey, a member of the now defunct International Socialist Organization, blocked a strike by teachers over Mayor Lori Lightfoot’s criminal reopening of schools.

On Monday night, CPS parents protested outside Lightfoot’s home demanding a remote option due to the lack of safety protocols and thousands of students who have been placed on quarantine for COVID-19 exposure. While the sentiments of parents were no doubt sincere, the “remote option” demand has been promoted in Chicago, New York City and other locations by sections of the trade union bureaucracy affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America as a means of letting off steam and encouraging individual opt-outs by concerned parents, rather than collective action by the working class to close the schools, which is a critical component of the public health strategy needed to save lives.

The WSWS is assisting educators and parents in expanding the growing national and international network of educators rank-and-file committees, which are seeking not to “mitigate” the pandemic, but to eliminate and eradicate it once and for all. This means shutting all schools and non-essential businesses and providing the necessary resources for the protection of incomes and provision of high-quality remote learning. This must be combined with universal testing, contact tracing and quarantining, and a vast expansion of vaccinations. This science-driven strategy can only be implemented in a political struggle against both big business parties that have prioritized profit over saving lives.

“The focus has to be on eradication,” Michael, the parent in San Luis Obispo said. “Everything else is not enough.”



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