

As fall begins in Northern Hemisphere, school reopenings fuel global spread of COVID-19

Evan Blake**20 September 2021**

As fall begins in the Northern Hemisphere and schools have fully reopened throughout the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has reached a critical turning point.

At present, the global average of daily new cases stands at roughly 515,000, while an average of 8,336 people are dying from COVID-19 each day worldwide. These figures have decreased slightly in recent weeks, but given the inadequate testing in almost every country, the real figures are much higher. A survey of excess deaths from *The Economist* notes that while the official global death toll now stands at 4.7 million, the real figure is likely more than three times as high at 15.6 million deaths.

With only 31.4 percent of the world population fully vaccinated against COVID-19, the vast majority in the wealthiest countries, billions of people remain at risk of infection globally. Furthermore, the uninhibited spread of the virus creates the conditions for the evolution of more infectious and vaccine-resistant variants. On Monday, there were reports of 19 cases in the UK of the more transmissible Delta variant with an E484K mutation associated with greater resistance to vaccines. There have been 99 cases of Delta + E484K sequenced worldwide, including 25 in the United States, 22 in Denmark, 21 in Turkey, six in Italy, and three in Germany.

Most of the roughly 1.5 billion children who switched to remote learning at the start of the pandemic have now returned for fully in-person learning, as capitalist governments worldwide have pursued this policy. The vast majority of these children have not been vaccinated and constitute a growing percentage of new COVID-19 cases worldwide. They have become the primary vector for transmitting the virus to their families and communities, and experts have warned that the full reopening of schools will cause a major surge of the pandemic in the coming months.

The fundamental aim of reopening schools has always been to compel parents to return to unsafe workplaces in order to boost corporate profits and sustain the perpetual rise of the stock market. This only furthers the spread of COVID-19, with large factories often the second leading source of outbreaks after schools and colleges.

The dominant pandemic strategy worldwide remains “herd immunity,” based on letting the virus rip through the

population regardless of the levels of infections and deaths. This strategy is sharply expressed in the policy of school reopenings, which exposes millions of children to the virus, with unknown long-term consequences.

While various politicians and trade union officials claim that limited mitigation measures such as mask wearing can make schools safe, the real conditions in overcrowded and poorly ventilated schools expose this as a fraud.

The only viable strategy towards the pandemic is one which aims at the global eradication of COVID-19, to be achieved through mass vaccinations and the universal deployment of all public health measures available, until new cases are brought to zero and the virus eliminated in ever-wider geographic regions. In opposition to this strategy, the ruling elites everywhere are pursuing “herd immunity,” either openly or under the cover of “mitigations.”

In Latin America, which accounts for roughly 8 percent of the world population but one-third of global deaths from COVID-19, schools have reopened throughout the continent. The direst situation is in Brazil, where cases among children have soared as schools fully reopened nationwide. Brazil has the highest number of child deaths from COVID-19 of any country, with 1,581 young people aged 10 to 19 succumbing to the virus in the first half of 2021, and another 1,187 children under the age of 10 dying from COVID-19 since the pandemic began.

Across Europe, school reopenings are expected to produce a catastrophic surge of the pandemic in the coming weeks. The World Health Organization (WHO) recently warned at the end of August that another 236,000 people could die from COVID-19 in Europe by December 1. In France, in the last week of August there were 20,200 cases recorded among children aged 0-19, more than five times the same figure a year ago. In the UK, all mitigation measures have been scrapped and COVID-19 is ripping through schools, with massive surges taking place in Scotland and forecast to hit England in the coming weeks. Cases are also steadily rising in Germany, where schools have reopened, causing outbreaks across the country.

In Africa, official cases and deaths are on the decline, but testing is limited throughout the continent. *The Economist*

estimates that excess deaths are at the highest multiple of official deaths in Africa, with roughly 1.86 million excess deaths, or over nine times the official death toll. At present, only 50 million Africans, or 3.6 percent of the total population, have been fully vaccinated, with the continent facing a 500 million-dose shortage this year. As schools and workplaces fully reopen throughout Africa, COVID-19 will silently spread throughout the population in the coming weeks.

In Asia, official cases and deaths are also declining, but daily excess deaths stand at 20,300, nearly seven times the official figure and by far the highest of any continent in absolute terms. Significantly, major surges are underway in Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand, all of which had previously eliminated COVID-19 but after lifting travel restrictions and public health measures became centers for transmission. China, which has maintained the elimination strategy, has had to severely restrict international travel and mobilize vast resources to contain repeated outbreaks of the Delta variant brought into the country.

In Australia, which had also previously eliminated COVID-19, cases are once again surging as schools fully reopen. In New Zealand, the Delta variant is feared to be spreading through schools outside Auckland, the largest city which remains at a “Level 4” lockdown. Noted public health experts, including University of Otago epidemiologist Michael Baker, warned in a September 10 blog post that “children are returning to in-person learning with little or no protection against the potential spread of Covid-19 infection in schools.”

The center of the global pandemic is now in North America, with the United States, Canada and Mexico experiencing major surges in new cases driven primarily by school reopenings. In Alberta, Canada, the surge is approaching peaks reached last winter, with a daily average of 1,646 new cases in the province.

In the US, there are now an average of 134,972 new COVID-19 cases and 1,582 deaths each day. In the past week, a staggering 844,718 people were officially infected and 10,568 people died from COVID-19. The official cumulative death toll stands at 691,880, while the real figure is estimated to be between 800,000-890,000, greater than the total number of Americans killed during the Civil War and the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic.

The situation is catastrophic throughout the country. Roughly a quarter of all hospitals report that their intensive care units are at or near capacity. As a result of school reopenings, roughly one million children were officially infected with COVID-19 in the five weeks from August 5 to September 9. Child hospitalizations and deaths are at record levels across the US, with an average of 354 children hospitalized every day.

After the Biden administration prematurely declared “independence” from the pandemic on July 4, the scale of the present surge and the dangers posed by the full reopening of schools continue to be minimized. All talk of mitigation measures has disappeared in the corporate media.

A major photo essay published *Friday* in the *Washington Post* is a case in point. Titled “Glimpses of How Pandemic America Went Back to School,” the piece glorifies school reopenings in the US and exposes the fraud of so-called mitigations in schools. Almost every photograph shows students, staff or both not wearing masks.

Journalist Dana Goldstein writes that school reopenings “have been exciting, anxiety-provoking and sometimes even amusing.” She falsely claims that “schools have generally been able to operate safely during the pandemic with only limited on-site transmission of the virus.”

In reality, just in the past week there have been reports of hundreds or thousands of infections of students and staff in schools across West Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, Georgia, Minnesota, California, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Florida, and other states. According to one informal tracker, roughly 250 school employees have died from COVID-19 since the last week of July, amounting to roughly 35 per week or five per day throughout August and September.

The global state of the pandemic and the role that schools play as centers of viral transmission make clear that all schools must be closed in order to eliminate and ultimately eradicate COVID-19. This must be combined with the closure of all nonessential workplaces, universal masking, the rapid vaccination of the world population, mass testing, contact tracing, the safe isolation of infected patients, and all other public health measures needed to cut off the chain of transmission. All workers and small business owners affected by these measures must be given the necessary resources during lockdowns, which scientists stress need last no longer than two months.

These measures will only be implemented through the mass mobilization of the working class. In every country, the unions have proven to be pliant tools of the ruling elites, with the teachers unions the most fervent advocates of school reopenings. To fight for the elimination-eradication strategy necessary to end the pandemic, workers in every industry and country must build rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and all capitalist parties. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), established on May 1, 2021, will serve as the central nexus to unite and coordinate these committees globally.



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