

Pennsylvania COVID-19 cases and deaths up tenfold after full reopening of schools

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Coronavirus cases and deaths are once again surging in Pennsylvania, with the seven-day average of daily new cases now standing at 4,774, a jump of over 30 percent in the past 14 days and tenfold since August. On June 27, after schools had closed for the summer, the seven-day average of daily new cases stood at 165 cases per day, nearly 30 times lower than the present daily average. The number of deaths is also up tenfold in less than two months, climbing from a seven-day average of four per day on August 1 to 42 per day at present.

The surge in infections and deaths has been driven by the lifting of all restrictions and the reopening of schools in August, promoted by Democratic Governor Tom Wolf along with local politicians, allowing the highly transmissible Delta variant to rip through the population.

Hospitalizations are also on the rise statewide, with 2,337 people currently hospitalized with COVID-19, of whom 588 are in intensive care and 283 on ventilation. This compares to fewer than 500 people hospitalized at the beginning of August.

Infections and hospitalizations of children are also skyrocketing. The number of new cases amongst children 0-4 for the week from September 8 to 14 grew to 1,057, bringing the cumulative total since August 16 to 3,678. For school age children, the number of new cases climbed to 7,218 and a total of just under 20,000 since August 16, compared to 630 cases during the same week in 2020.

Philadelphia

Within two weeks of reopening, six schools in Philadelphia have been forced to close because of COVID-19 outbreaks. Emlen Elementary School became the first school to return to all virtual because it had 10 COVID-19 cases emerge last Monday.

Philadelphia County is reporting a 7-day average of over 300 new cases per day, the highest in the state.

A high school teacher in the district told the WSWs, “Since then, another K-8 elementary school, Lindley Academy in the Logan section of the city near where I teach, also closed due to 6 cases. This was followed by the very latest school Pan American Charter School in North Philly. We also have had student cases, both identified and unidentified.”

The pandemic has also meant that schools all across the country are short-staffed. Many teachers have died or are sick. Others have left education, fearing both for themselves and for family members they live with.

“Our school is very short-staffed with teachers, coaches and even admins having to do extra coverage because of so many unfilled teacher vacancies after scores of teachers left this summer for other schools. We just started and it is already close to being unsustainable to continue in the building if we have any sustained case outbreaks.”

Another high school teacher commented, “It is ridiculous that we are putting so many children, ourselves, their parents and the community at risk to be opening the schools as COVID is spreading again. The politicians don’t care about the people, just the top one percent. We should be working to eradicate the virus, not learning to live with it.”

Since the beginning of this school year, the Pennsylvania Department of Health has reported over 2,000 cases of COVID-19 among children in Philadelphia County. This is a massive, deliberate under-count, as testing of students who have had close contact with those infected with COVID-19 has ceased. Only students showing symptoms will be tested, with weekly tests for student athletes and performers.

According to the School District of Philadelphia

website, “Currently Test to Stay is paused by the Philadelphia Department of Public Health (PDPH) due to rising case counts. As case counts fall, PDPH will reevaluate and advise the District the best time to start Test to Stay.”

Northampton Area School District in Lehigh Valley

Just north of Allentown, Pennsylvania, Northampton is within Lehigh County. Throughout the county, nearly 700 school age children and another 180 children under 4 have been infected with COVID-19 so far this school year.

Northampton Area School District teacher and football coach Mike Gurdineer died September 8 after battling COVID-19. He was just 41-years old. Mike was an 8th grade social studies teacher and assistant football coach. He left behind a wife and four children, and the entire family is also battling COVID-19.

“Mike was an excellent teacher, colleague and mentor for our students,” said District Superintendent Joseph Kovalchik. “He was always willing to do whatever it took to help students and the school improve. Mike always put the students first. He was a first-class individual.”

Pittsburgh

Coronavirus cases in Pittsburgh and the surrounding areas have also skyrocketed since schools began reopening, forcing the temporary closure of many classrooms and schools. These include the following:

- The Beaver Area School District was forced to switch its high school and one elementary school to virtual learning for at least two weeks after an outbreak of COVID-19 in the two schools. The district was to re-evaluate the status on Friday but has yet to publish an announcement on its website.
- The Woodland Hills School district closed one of its elementary schools for two weeks as over 10 cases of COVID-19 were found among students younger than 12.
- The Butler Area School District is reporting 45 active cases including 16 at its high school and 15 at its intermediate school.

Pittsburgh, the second largest school district in the state, has yet to close any of their schools despite a steady increase in the number of active COVID-19 cases. According to the district dashboard, there are 15 active cases in Carrick HS, five at Bashare HS and

eight at Sci Tech.

“More and more students are getting sick,” said a Pittsburgh school bus driver. “They don’t want to close the schools; they want to pretend that everything is fine. Sooner or later, someone is going to die, and it is going to be on them.”

Denouncing the role of the unions that have facilitated the school reopening campaign, the bus driver said bluntly, “We don’t have a union, that is just another deduction from our pay check.”

The Pennsylvania Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers-Pennsylvania have also fully supported the resumption of in-person teaching, threatening teachers who have spoken up and those who ask for medical exemptions.

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is organizing teachers, parents and students independently of the unions and both the Democrats and Republicans. The committee is fighting for the complete closure of schools and all non-essential production, as part of a broader strategy to stop the spread of COVID-19 and ultimately eradicate the virus worldwide. The committee meets every Thursday evening at 7:30 pm EDT and invites educators, staff and parents to attend. For more information and to sign up for our newsletter please visit www.wsws.org/edsafety.



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