

COVID-19 cases explode among Chicago students as schools remain open

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The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is independent of the CTU and Democratic Party and aims to unite educators, parents, students and the broader working class to prepare strike action to close all schools and nonessential workplaces. We call on all Chicago educators, parents and students to join our committee today.

Less than one month into the school year, cases of COVID-19 have exploded among students at Chicago Public Schools (CPS). Officially, the district has recorded 558 cases among students, and nearly 10,000 are currently in quarantine even with the district's almost nonexistent testing and contact tracing. Despite the danger to children and educators, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, in line with the entire state Democratic Party, has insisted that schools are safe and must remain open for in-person learning, even though nearly all previously announced mitigation measures have been rescinded or remain a dead letter.

In addition to the official student cases recorded by CPS, there have officially been 185 cases among educators and other staff. These numbers vastly understate the level of spread in schools. In some cases, it appears CPS is delaying adding known cases to its online tracker. While CPS claimed before the school year started that they would test students weekly, only three percent of CPS students have registered for testing, a consequence of the fact that the program has been opt-in and the district has made little effort to sign students up.

In fact, the whole process of testing and quarantining is obviously designed to present bureaucratic hurdles to parents and students who might wish to be tested and to serve as a disincentive to report any positive tests or exposure. Many parents have reported on social media that CPS has sent messages that their children may have been exposed and should quarantine days after the fact, while teachers have reported being left in the dark about their students' status. In what amounts to a punitive measure for quarantining students, they are denied an option for remote learning while away from school, and essentially given a packet of homework to complete on their own.

Statewide data from the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) paints a somewhat more accurate picture of the grim situation in schools, although it too likely understates the cases given limited testing and the abysmal state of contact tracing.

According to IDPH data, the number of cases being recorded in young children aged 5-11, who are being forced back into school despite being ineligible for vaccines, has exploded in the current surge driven by the Delta variant. The week ending September 4 has been the worst so far, with 3,654 cases among this younger age group, 73 percent higher than the number of cases for that age group on January 9. Although cases declined somewhat for the week ending September 18, to 2,514, the level of infections for children too young to be vaccinated remains higher than during last year's winter surge.

IDPH also lists active COVID-19 outbreaks at 257 schools, with 31 in Cook County and eight in Chicago, including four at CPS charter schools. According to state contact tracing data, schools represent the largest source of potential exposures, at 28 percent. Although the IDPH graph listing the sources of current outbreaks omits schools, they would be the biggest source of outbreaks in the state, with "Factory/Manufacturer" coming in second with 212 outbreaks.

The state has also seen recent deaths of students, educators and their family members.

On Monday, 43-year-old Shenitha "Angel" Curry, the mother of a CPS student at Jensen Elementary, died from COVID-19. At least 205 students, including her child, had gone into quarantine after there were eight confirmed COVID-19 cases among students and staff at the school. Curry's sister has told local media that Curry was sure her illness stemmed from the outbreaks at her child's school.

On September 13, 39-year-old Cherie Garza, a teacher at Crete-Monee Middle School, in Chicago's far south suburbs, died of COVID-19. Garza had planned to get vaccinated before the beginning of the school year but fell ill before getting the chance to do so, as a result of the state's

widespread reopening while the Delta variant was beginning to run rampant.

Just a few days later, on September 17, 17-year-old Alexia Garrison died. Garrison, a student at Taylorville High School, southeast of the state capital in Springfield, initially had only mild symptoms, and had seemingly been symptom-free for several days, prior to her sudden collapse and death.

There is growing opposition among Chicago parents, educators and students to the reckless reopening of schools, which has caused all of the above needless infections and deaths. After UK parent Lisa Diaz called for a school strike in the UK, Chicago parents took this up and are preparing to organize similar protests in Chicago this Friday.

Far from expressing any kind of concern for the nearly 10,000 CPS students in quarantine due to being a close contact of someone who tested positive, Lightfoot instead complained that CPS was being overly strict in its quarantine decisions and promised changes to the policy in order to keep more students in school, as has already taken place in New York City. CPS also stopped reporting the number of students considered close contacts on its website.

Saying she was “not happy and frankly deeply disappointed with the way CPS has handled this from the start of the school year,” Lightfoot said, “There is no reason the numbers should be growing.” She then claimed, contrary to scientific findings about the infectiousness of the Delta variant, “Passing someone in the hallway is not 15 minutes of substantive contact that would warrant the kind of quarantining that we have seen.”

During an interview with WTTW, Lightfoot said, “I’m confident that things will improve, and they’re going to improve because we have put Dr. [Allison] Arwady and her team on the case and they will be helping build up the infrastructure of CPS to do better case investigations and better contact tracing.”

In other words, Arwady, Commissioner for the Department of Public Health, is being sent into CPS to cover up what is seen by the ruling class as a mere public relations disaster. Arwady will ensure that neither testing nor contact tracing will be done in any systematic or comprehensive way that might disclose the actual state of disease spread and have the potential to shut down schools. She claimed last week that the case numbers at CPS were “really low numbers” and “certainly not unexpected.”

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), for its part, has suggested the “bungled” and “chaotic” reopening is due essentially to poor management by Lightfoot and district officials, rather than a conscious class policy. In fact, the CTU has maintained the fiction put forward by American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten that schools can be made safe through the use of limited

mitigation measures, even though it is abundantly clear that maintaining those standards across an entire school day is all but impossible, even when the resources exist.

CTU President Jesse Sharkey basically agreed with Lightfoot’s complaints about quarantine, calling it a “crude measure for trying to stop the spread of COVID in our schools.” Far from trying to combat the unsafe resumption of in-person learning, since their sabotage of the teachers’ struggle against reopening in the spring, CTU leaders have repeatedly insisted they be brought in officially to help with the management of the pandemic in schools through an agreement with the district.

Parents, for their part, have criticized the lack of a remote option, the consequence of an edict by the Illinois State Board of Education. Parents who have refused to send their children back to school have also seen them declared inactive, the first step to being disenrolled from school.

At a recent online event hosted by the CTU, the union made clear it would undertake no serious struggle to shut down schools or otherwise protect students and teachers. Referring to the toothless “safety committees” created through the reopening agreement, CTU Recording Secretary Maria Moreno expressed the union leadership’s hostility to genuine struggles, and commitment to issuing only mild criticisms of Lightfoot and CPS leadership. If conditions are unsafe at a given school, she threatened merely to “organize a press conference in front of the school.”

She added, “We pushed the board, unfortunately, to the point of threatening to go on strike and work actions to move. We would prefer not to have to do that all the time, every time with the board of ed[ucation], and the mayor, because it takes a lot of resources and time away from what teachers and educators went into the profession of teaching, which was to teach your children.”

CPS educators, parents and students who are looking for a way to combat the dangerous reopening plan must understand that the CTU is not an organization working in their interests. The only way forward is through the building of the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee as part of a nationwide and international network of rank-and-file committees. Those interested in joining this committee should sign up today to get involved.



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