

CPS Sickout leader and mother of three speaks on efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19 in Chicago Public Schools

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11 October 2021

Cortney Ritsema, a 38-year-old mother of three, formed CPS Sickout with other parents to raise awareness about the dangers of COVID-19 and keep kids out of school during the pandemic to protect them from the deadly virus. The group was established in the winter months earlier this year as the threat of infection grew due to the reopening of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) enforced by Democratic mayor Lori Lightfoot.

Schools were reopened in February with the critical assistance of the Chicago Teachers Union, which first permitted teachers and staff to be divided into “waves” and sent back into schools before an agreement was reached, undermining the solidarity required for coordinated resistance. Then the union pushed through a reopening agreement, claiming no more could be won in bargaining with the city and that a strike had little support among either teachers or the public.

According to data presented online by CPS, 1,366 students and 369 teachers and staff have tested positive for COVID-19 since August 29. As of October 10, 5,438 students and 261 adults were out of school in quarantine or isolation.

Anger erupted among parents and students in September after 43-year-old mother Shenitha Curry died of COVID-19. It is believed she contracted the virus from her daughter who got sick after returning to school. Her two other daughters also contracted the virus. Curry is one of two parents of students at Jensen Elementary who died from COVID-19 last month.

Kristina Betinis: Can you say a bit about CPS Sickout, where it came from?

Cortney Ritsema: CPS Sickout was formed last February as a counter-narrative to the reopen schools crowd, which was largely white. Our group formed as a counter to that because the reopen schools groups were being used by the city to say, “this is what parents want,” and this is what they are pressuring for. So, we formed to provide the counter: No, this isn’t what parents want. And here’s a bunch of us who don’t want that. We want schools to all shut. The media presented “reopening” as the voice of parents.

The other thing the media did is present mine as a just an individual “story,” one white mom. But the majority of CPS families kept their kids home in the spring and didn’t go for reopening. But what we did is part of what the majority of parents chose to do. The vast majority of CPS parents, of which the student body is overwhelmingly black and brown, kept their children home in the spring.

KB: That is important history. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) at their recent panel did the same, presenting the views of

parents and teachers as reactionary, the anti-vax and anti-mask positions.

CR: Right, right. The president of the AFT invited them to have a town hall. I tweeted at her asking, “where’s our invite. We speak for the other part of the parents!”

KB: You cut right to the chase in your video that the reopening is about keeping the economy going.

CR: If parents have to be at work, kids have to be at school.

KB: Can you say a little bit about yourself and your background?

CR: My background is in child welfare. Before I was a mom of three and before I was a stay at home mom, I was working as a therapist doing contract work for the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), working with the most vulnerable people in our city. I was serving as a therapist for kids who were removed from homes and then working with parents who were going through the therapy process to regain custody of their kids. I think that explains a lot of my interests and my activism around all of this, because I have seen the city and community a lot of people do not get a glimpse into and how difficult circumstances are.

I have an eight year old and then I have five-year-old twins. I have been a stay at home mom for eight years now. And that is a whole other issue of how our society does not support moms and families. I do not make enough money to cover childcare on my own. I was out there doing important work and we just could not afford childcare. It is sad that it becomes a decision about like money.

KB: Can you say more about CPS Sickout’s efforts to oppose the school reopening in the winter months?

CR: Yeah, we [CPS Sickout] had our first action on February 1. That was our first sickout action. We had been meeting since January. I intended to keep my kids at home, like the majority of people in the district did. And what we found was that the remote option more and more pushed to the side. All the focus and all the resources were being put into reopening CPS, when the majority of students were staying home and wanted remote learning.

So that is where we really started to fight. The families who were choosing to remain home and not be part of the reopening, and it was the majority of the district, we were getting the shaft. Students and teachers too. Simultaneous teaching was no good.

It was terrible for everyone. Watching the kids during online classes, once the schools were reopened—you know, the kids that were online were completely ignored. My two twins in pre-K went from having an hour class every day to having 40 minutes every day. Teachers sometimes would just text me in the morning and be like the only kids

that are going to show up for online are your two, so we are going to cancel today.

KB: CPS did everything possible to make it as difficult, unattractive and unworkable as possible.

CR: Yeah, this was part of the plan, right? To make it as hard as possible and make it fit with the narrative that remote learning does not work.

Well, my oldest daughter flourished in remote learning. She did so well because she has anxiety issues. And so, taking the social anxiety piece out, she was able to really focus on what she was doing in school. And not only that, she was able to get into subjects that really interested her and spend more time developing and learning around those topics and challenging herself.

Her grades improved significantly. She went from being below grade average on everything to her reading and writing and math going above her grade level. So, this whole narrative that kids learn best in the classroom and that remote learning does not work, it was very purposeful and not based in the data at all.

KB: What were the conversations you all had over the summer about the fall reopening? Did you decide early on you would be keeping the kids home in August?

CR: So, my journey there was a little different because I actually was starting to feel more comfortable about my kids returning in the fall. In June, I was starting to think maybe this could work. The numbers are low, it seems like they were able to keep the kids safe in the spring. So, I was kind of swallowing the pill, like, okay, I can do this and maybe we will be ready to send them in the fall.

I was assuming that they would keep the same mitigations in place. This was before the Delta variant was running rampant. Then we started hearing about the Delta variant, how much more contagious it is. And then CPS started announcing all of the mitigations that they were taking away. And at that point I was like, I am not sending my kids. I am going to keep them home.

So, I reached out to the organizers that I was working with CPS Sickout and was like, okay, what is going on? At that point, we had a big split in our group. We had started out as eight organizers from all over the city, but only three of us did not feel comfortable sending our kids back to school in the fall. The parents who were sending their kids back did not feel comfortable standing up and supporting those of us who were not. And to this day, we are still trying to figure it out.

KB: It sounds like the bipartisan campaign to reopen the economy and schools with it created a major rift.

CR: Yeah, it definitely has. So, we, we went from a larger number of parent organizers who were diverse, to three in three months.

KB: And are all three remaining white moms on the [more affluent] North Side?

CR: Yeah.

KB: There is a racist narrative being promoted by Lightfoot and others, including some CTU leaders, that remote learning is harmful to black and brown communities. When in fact the reopening of schools endangers everyone, but especially the neighborhoods with the lowest vaccination rates, which are right now in Chicago in majority black and Hispanic working class neighborhoods. Two mothers are dead from infections at Jensen Elementary. And all this for the economy, for profit.

CR: Yeah, absolutely.

KB: Finally, I want to ask you about the October 1 school strike and the program of COVID eradication. How do you understand the call for eradication? Can you say a little bit about it?

CR: So, I am just kind of learning about eradication, to be honest. It was brought to our attention through the global parents strike on October 1. Because we really did not see a lot of speaking up about shutting it down.

We felt like we were the only parent group saying, shut the schools down. What are we doing? Pay to keep these parents home. Make it possible for parents to be with their kids. The schools messaging is there is no safer place than the classroom for our child. And we are saying, "No, there is no safer place than home for a child. And let's make sure that we are taking care of these families."

So really, we became aware of the effort for eradication through Lisa Diaz and her outreach on Twitter and social media. I absolutely support it. And that is why we quickly reached out to her and joined forces with her. Then we went to parent groups in New York City, in Rhode Island, in Detroit. We started meeting on Zoom with them and passing on what Lisa was telling us.

KB: That's fantastic. There is an upcoming WSWs webinar on October 24 making the case for COVID-19 eradication, making clear the scientific basis and the political basis for it. Both require a highly conscious and coordinated global effort.

CR: And this is exactly what we need. We need to build coalitions through every aspect of it. It cannot just be parents, you know, it has to be everyone involved. I am in the process of reaching out to other groups who are doing organizing, community groups very much a part of the fabric of the communities here in Chicago. And I am starting to meet with other people and talk about this and what is going on in the schools, what are you seeing in your community, what are you seeing in your workplace. Trying to recruit people to work together and figure out how we are going to shut this all down. All of us. I am at the very beginning stages of this. I just had two meetings with two different community groups this past week. So little by little, meeting people where they are and building relationships.

The scientific and political basis for COVID eradication will be presented October 24 at the online event, "How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication," organized by the World Socialist Web Site and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. All those looking for the way to save lives should register and share the event information as broadly as possible.



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