

Anger erupts over COVID-19 death of Chicago Public Schools educator as cases spike

Alexander Fangmann
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Chicago Public Schools (CPS) parents and educators are calling for schools to return to remote instruction after the death of Jonl Bush, a special education classroom assistant (SECA) at Carnegie Elementary School in the city's Woodlawn neighborhood. The 44-year-old educator died from COVID-19 on November 26, leaving behind a six-year-old daughter. Bush, who had been a CPS employee since 2002, was fully vaccinated, his mother Claudette Bush said.

The elementary school where Bush worked has been hit by a spike in infections, with 22 cases since mid-November and 113 students and school personnel in quarantine as of last Sunday. Despite this, CPS officials, who issued a perfunctory statement on Bush's death, insisted they found "no evidence of widespread or unchecked in-school transmission." Therefore, they claimed, "There is no public health recommendation or requirement to close this school."

In fact, infections are rising in the nation's third largest school district, which has seen 1,119 cases among adults and 3,775 among students since the beginning of the school year. On December 6—the last day for which data was available—there were 193 positive cases among students in the district, nearly double the number reported on any other day this school year. These numbers almost certainly downplay the real number of cases in the schools. Only 9 percent of students are enrolled in the district's weekly testing program, while just 12.6 percent of students under 12 are fully vaccinated, as well as fewer than half of those 12 and older.

Claudette Bush spoke at press conference Monday. "I'm not just hurt, I'm angry" she declared. Jonl, she said, had received his booster shot last month. Despite this he began to feel tired the week of November 22 but reported to school anyway. By the next day, she said, he

was running a low fever and received a positive test result. After isolating from his family over Thanksgiving, he was found dead at home in his favorite chair the following day.

Bush said her son, who also has three siblings working at CPS, was set to become a special education teacher. "We were so much looking forward to March when he should have been through with his student teaching, and he could go full time in the classroom." She called on CPS to strengthen its COVID-19 protocols, hoping her son's death would prevent others. "Nothing's gonna bring him back. But if his passing brings attention, shines a spotlight on a bigger problem, then his death will not have been in vain."

Also speaking was Carnegie parent Alicia Gill, who expressed her anger on Facebook over the attempt by CPS to keep Bush's death under wraps. "Why in the hell [is] Andrew Carnegie Elementary School hiding the fact that [a] teacher died over Thanksgiving weekend from COVID?" Stating that she had never received an email from the school or district, Gill said she had "just attended the funeral of a teacher Saturday." She added, "I'm sick of it, close all these schools down, period." Gill called for teachers to "protest for virtual learning" and for "parents to help me organize."

Jonl Bush is not the only Chicago educator to have died from COVID-19 recently. Darius Holmes, a 37-year-old adjunct mathematics professor at the City Colleges of Chicago, died on November 18. Their preventable deaths, like those of other CPS educators, students and parents, are entirely the result of the criminal policy of the Biden White House and the Democratic administration of Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot to keep the schools open despite the surge of cases across the country and, in particular, in the Midwestern states of Illinois, Minnesota,

Michigan, Wisconsin and Ohio.

As schools have remained open and restrictions on events and travel have been almost entirely lifted, Illinois has seen a spike in all COVID-19 metrics. According to the latest data, there have been an average of 6,545 new cases per day in the state, and 41 deaths, with over 150 deaths in the past two days alone, the highest daily death tolls in 10 months. Case numbers are now the highest they have been since last fall's surge. Additionally, the city and state health departments reported on Monday the first positive case involving the Omicron variant in a Chicago resident.

One Chicago parent tweeted: "My immune compromised child has been back to school for a total of 8 days. He's now in the hospital w COVID. He was in 4 d & then his whole class quarantined. Back 4 d & now positive."

The deadly contagion has had a particularly brutal impact on teachers and support staff. According to the Twitter account @LostToCovid, at least 2,071 educators in the United States have died of COVID-19 in the US, with 1,632 of those deaths occurring since August 1.

Monday's news conference with Claudette Bush was called by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73, the union her son belonged to. But the truth is both organizations have blood on their hands for collaborating with city and school officials in forcing teachers and students back into schools.

Marching in lockstep with the national American Federation of Teachers union, the supposedly "left" CTU played the central role in the reopening of schools last spring and herding 330,000 students and 35,000 school employees back into dangerous buildings. In February 2021, Chicago teachers were in the forefront of the nationwide resistance to the return to in-person classes, pressing for strike action to protect themselves, their students and communities.

Union President Jesse Sharkey and other CTU officials held dozens of backroom "negotiations" with Lightfoot and CPS officials, which were all premised on the insistence that "schools had to reopen." The CTU, falsely claiming that "schools could reopen safely," worked out a series of largely cosmetic protocols and launched a campaign of intimidation to wear down resistance and push through the back-to-school agreement.

While educators are dying and pressing for the full conversion to virtual-only teaching, CTU President Sharkey is once again in "negotiations" with city and

school officials to "increase testing and vaccination opportunities for students and families, address cleaning and ventilation needs, hire more staff and agree to a metric that will indicate when a school or the district needs to shift to remote learning," according to the *Tribune*.

This is no less bogus than last winter's back-to-school agreement. The current "metrics" already demand the closing of the schools, even before the full impact of the winter surge and the Omicron variant hit. The fact is the CTU is complicit with the city and district in concealing the real scope of the current dangers.

But opposition by rank-and-file teachers in Chicago and around the country continues to grow. In Detroit, public school educators at The School at Marygrove (TSM) have conducted a series of sickouts this week, demanding school safety in the aftermath of the Oxford High School shootings and the halting of in-person learning as the COVID-19 test positivity rate reached 19 percent Thursday, according to officials from the Detroit Federation of Teachers. The job action by TSM educators was taken independently of the DFT.

Addressing herself to Chicago educators, one of the leaders of the sickouts told the WSWS, "I lend my full support to any teachers who are willing to stand, with or without the backing of their union. Stand strong! Politicians and union leaders say schools must remain open for the mental health of children. What will be the impact on their mental health if their classmate or their teacher dies? It is important that we do what's right by the children and ourselves. We deserve the right to be safe and healthy as a basic human right. I would love to work with any other teachers who have these goals in mind. Stand strong, Chicago teachers. We support you."

The WSWS urges educators, parents and students in Chicago, Detroit and around the country to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to oppose the profit-driven back-to-school and back-to-work policy and to fight for a strategy to eliminate COVID-19 and save lives.



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