

Pennsylvania educators call for immediate closure of schools to stop the spread of COVID-19

Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
17 December 2021

Members of the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee met Thursday evening and unanimously passed the following resolution calling for the immediate closure of all schools and non-essential services as part of a massive public health measure to stop the spread of COVID. To get involved with our committee, sign up here.

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls for the immediate closure of all schools for in-person learning, as a necessary measure to stop the spread of COVID-19. The rapid increases in cases in Pennsylvania over the past few weeks and the imminent danger of the Omicron variant require the shutdown of in-person learning along with all non-essential businesses as part of a massive public health effort to stop viral transmission.

Public health officials from the World Health Organization have issued dire warnings that the Omicron variant will “hit like a tsunami,” overloading health care systems and causing another devastating wave of infection and death.

Not even three weeks after the first case of Omicron was detected in England, it has become the dominant strain in London. Cases have reached an all-time high across the country, at 68,000 Wednesday. Health authorities are warning that the country could reach 1 million daily new cases by the end of December.

In the US, the first case of Omicron was identified on December 1. Just two weeks later, the variant now accounts for more than 13 percent of new cases in New York and New Jersey. It threatens to become the dominant strain within weeks, replacing the already highly infectious Delta variant that has caused a massive health crisis this fall.

The Omicron variant has also been identified in Philadelphia.

In contrast to the irresponsibly premature claims that Omicron is “mild,” a cynical justification by governments for failing to take emergency measures to stop its spread, reports from South Africa prove the disease is very serious for children, with 5 percent of all children infected with the variant needing hospitalization. In one region of the country, over 100 infants have been hospitalized, the largest number in any age

group.

Further, early studies from South Africa and the UK have shown that the existing vaccines are far less effective against the Omicron variant than previous variants. The latest data from South Africa found that two shots of the Pfizer vaccine only provided 33 percent protection against symptomatic infection and 70 percent against hospitalization. If three doses of the vaccine are the new benchmark for who is fully vaccinated, then only 5 percent of the global population meets this criterion.

Since schools reopened in August for in-person learning, Pennsylvania has seen a drastic rise in the number of cases, hospitalizations and deaths, including a dramatic spike in the last two weeks. On December 1, the seven-day moving average for daily new cases was 5,714. On December 15, it reached 8,304, a 45 percent increase.

Over the summer, cases reached a trough, with a seven-day moving average of around 170 cases. Democratic Governor Tom Wolf seized upon this to fully reopen the economy and lift restrictions that were meant to curb the spread of COVID-19. In line with the Biden administration’s demands, Wolf pushed for the full reopening of schools, a necessary step to force parents and caregivers back to work.

The results of these reckless reopening policies have been as tragic as they are predictable.

On Monday, 17-year-old Alayna Thach died from COVID-19 after being sick for only a week. Alayna was a senior at Olney Charter High School in North Philadelphia. She was an honor student, and by all accounts a kind and beloved student, daughter, and friend. Our committee extends our deepest condolences to her family and friends.

The tragedy her family has now suffered has been shared by 19 other families across Pennsylvania, nearly 1,000 across the US, and thousands more globally.

Most of the time, these deaths go unreported in the corporate-controlled media. This is a deliberate policy to normalize what is a devastating tragedy to families and a loss to society. It is meant to perpetuate the myth that children do not really get sick from COVID-19.

The reality is increasingly grim, as COVID-19 cases among children are skyrocketing nationwide. The latest American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) report, released Monday, found that for the week ending December 9, 164,289 children were officially infected, the 18th straight week of over 100,000 new cases. All regions of the US saw increases, with record numbers in the Northeast and Midwest.

The report also noted 17 new deaths among children.

It is the policies of the Biden administration, the Wolf administration, and those of the ruling elites worldwide that have created the conditions in which these precious young lives are cut short, and millions more children are suffering from potentially long-term debilitation.

Since taking office in January, Biden had downplayed the danger that COVID-19 poses to children. In February, he lied outright to a second grader on national television, telling her “Kids don’t get [COVID] very often,” and that she “wasn’t likely...to spread it to mommy or daddy.”

Continuing the policies of the Trump administration, Biden’s first domestic priority was to ensure that all schools be fully open for in-person learning, so that parents could return to work.

Governor Wolf has followed suit. In March 2020, when daily new COVID-19 cases stood at around 100, Wolf ordered the closing of in-person education. Today, with daily new cases averaging more than 7,000 and moving upward, the Wolf administration is proposing to lift even mask mandates within schools.

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) also bears responsibility for forcing educators and students back into unsafe classrooms. Far from mobilizing their members to fight for safe, fully funded remote learning during the pandemic, the PFT has fallen in line with the policies of the national American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and pushed for the full reopening of schools in one of the largest districts in the country.

In February, Philadelphia’s Democratic Mayor Jim Kenney and Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) President Jerry T. Jordan negotiated behind the backs of educators and parents for the unsafe reopening of Philadelphia schools, claiming that wholly inadequate mitigations make schools safe.

It should be noted that Philadelphia has been run by the Democratic Party since 1952, and has overseen the deterioration of conditions inside public schools long before the pandemic.

Against the policies of the Democratic Party, and against the betrayals of the AFT and PFT, the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has campaigned throughout the pandemic for policies aimed at mobilizing the resources necessary to stop the pandemic and eliminate COVID-19 for good. To this end, we raise the following demands:

- **The immediate switch to fully remote learning in public, private and charter schools, combined with the closure of**

all non-essential production with full income protection for all affected workers. It is impossible to “safely” open schools during a raging pandemic. The necessary resources must be allotted for online learning, including high-speed Internet and computers for all households.

- **For a multitrillion-dollar public health campaign of vaccination, testing, contact tracing and safe means of guaranteeing the isolation of infected individuals.** The trillions of dollars amassed by the pandemic profiteers must be redistributed to provide the resources needed to confront this pandemic. In addition to lockdowns, these include programs to rapidly vaccinate the world’s population, universal testing and contact tracing, the safe isolation of infected individuals and quarantines. Essential workers and healthcare workers must be given the highest quality PPE and the equipment needed to filter the virus from the air.

- **For a globally organized campaign to eliminate and eradicate COVID-19.** The pandemic cannot be stopped on a national basis. The elimination of the virus requires global coordination at every step and requires the broad support of masses of people internationally.

These measures will not be taken by the Democrats or Republicans, who have proven repeatedly that their concerns are profits, not human lives. Nor will the teachers’ unions, which have been the main enforcer of the school reopening campaign, lead any struggle against the pandemic.

Only the mass mobilization of the international working class, in conjunction with the guidance of the most principled and far-sighted scientists and public health officials, can bring about the necessary change in global policy.

It is essential that teachers, parents and other workers draw the necessary lessons from the past year and a half. Our struggle cannot be left in the hands of the Democrats or the unions. Instead, we must build independent rank-and-file committees in every workplace and school district, and across industries in preparation for joint strike action to close the schools.

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Committee is committed to this struggle. For more information about joining this fight, e-mail our committee at paedrankandfile@gmail.com, text (412) 336-8245 or visit this page.



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