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Six more Philadelphia schools switch to virtual learning as Omicron spreads

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After teachers organized a wildcat sickout strike Monday that forced administrators to close Olney Charter High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on Monday, six more schools in the district have switched to virtual learning as the Omicron variant rips through the city and surrounding area. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced Tuesday evening that there were 288,000 new cases throughout the country and that over 70 percent of them are from the Omicron variant, an indication of just how transmissible it is.

The School District of Philadelphia announced that six schools are now on what they call a “pause” in which learning is done virtually. At one of the schools, the A. Philip Randolph Career Academy, the entire 9th grade class had been in quarantine before the school was forced to go virtual. The “pause” lasts for only 48 hours, and then the schools are set to reopen even as COVID-19 cases continue to skyrocket.

Last week, Alayna Thach, a 17-year-old senior at Olney Charter High School, died after battling COVID-19 for the previous week. She is the 20th child under 18 years old to die from the virus in Pennsylvania, the result of the social policy of reopening schools before the pandemic is stopped.

Friends, students and parents gathered Tuesday night for a memorial at a park near Alayna’s school to remember her life.

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has been organizing for a switch to virtual learning as part of a massive public health campaign to stop the spread of COVID-19 and end the pandemic.

“This is social murder,” said a teacher who is a member of the committee. “Schools should not have

been reopened. We didn’t have any of the means of controlling the virus. Most of our students weren’t even vaccinated and the school rejected proposals for holding vaccine clinics.

“The line they use in crime shows is ‘follow the money.’ Well look at the money that the corporations have made during the pandemic. Billions have become trillions. One can only assume that they want the pandemic to continue. And that means they need schools open to allow the parents to come to work, and so the pandemic continues to spread.

“I know it sounds extreme to think the rich would want this to happen. But when you look at what the science says and compare it to what they are doing, you have to draw the conclusion that they are aware of what they are doing. What other conclusions can you draw?”

Students at Harriton High School in the Lower Merion School District have been given the option to switch to virtual learning after a COVID-19 outbreak in which at least 18 students have tested positive. Those cases are linked to sports events and a performance production.

New COVID-19 cases continue to rise in the area. In Philadelphia, new cases are up a staggering 63 percent over the past two weeks and hospitalizations are up 46 percent. In neighboring Delaware and Chester counties, cases are up 51 percent and 41 percent respectfully. Hospitalizations are also up 42 percent in Delaware and 16 percent in Chester. In Montgomery county, cases are up 26 percent and hospitalizations up 43 percent.

Hospitals throughout Pennsylvania are reporting that they are running out of ICU beds and emergency rooms are filled with people waiting for hours to be seen. One doctor reported having to treat patients in the waiting

room.

In New York City, three schools have closed and officials say another 45 will soon close. Across the country, more than 200 schools have been forced to close as COVID-19 cases rise and they are faced with shortages of staff and bus drivers.

In New Jersey, cases are up 66 percent and hospitalizations up 54 percent over the past 14 days. In Delaware, cases are up 28 percent and hospitalization are up 54 percent in the past 14 days.

The deadly surge that has hit Pennsylvania and the rest of the nation began in the late summer and is now rapidly intensifying as Omicron has become the dominant variant. This surge is the direct product of the murderous policies of lifting restrictions and forcing the premature reopening of schools, which have been promoted by the Biden administration and Pennsylvania Democratic Governor Tom Wolf, with the active support of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

The reopening of schools was even more outrageous considering that the vast majority of children are unvaccinated. Vaccines for children aged 5-11 were only approved last month. Alayna Thach and her two siblings were scheduled to be vaccinated in January.

Overall, only about 21 percent of Philadelphia's eligible children aged 5-11 have received the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. The numbers are even worse for African American and Hispanic populations, which make up the bulk of the PSD population. Only 8 percent of Philadelphia's black children aged 5-11 have received at least one dose of vaccine, and just 12 percent of Hispanic children have received at least one dose.

Considering that early studies from South Africa and Europe show that it takes three vaccine doses to be protected from the Omicron variant, this means that almost all children are unprotected.

By all accounts Alayna was a healthy and robust 17-year-old, yet she died within a few days of contracting COVID-19. Her death highlights the lie promoted by the Biden administration and echoed in the media that children don't get COVID-19 very often and if they do it is not serious.

Starting Monday, long lines of people gathered outside of city libraries and recreation centers to receive free at-home test kits being distributed by the city

health department. The nine centers ran out of kits within less than an hour, giving out 300 to 375 test kits each as hundreds of people remained in line.

In the face of the mounting wave of infections, hospitalizations and deaths from the Omicron variant, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, in line with the policies of the AFT, continues to push for in-person learning. A look at both of their websites does not mention the death of a single student or teacher from COVID-19, nor warn of the danger of the continued spread of the pandemic. Instead, they boast of the need for in-person learning.

In Philadelphia, the PFT organized the reopening of the schools last spring by going from building to building to certify that they were safe. The PFT will no doubt use the 48-hour closures to falsely assure students and staff that it is safe to return.

Teachers at Olney Charter High School, who struggled to force the conversion to online learning, must be on guard that the union and administration will make one or two cosmetic changes to claim that the school is safe for reopening.

Teachers must draw the lessons of the past two years and place no faith in the AFT or PFT. These organizations do not represent teachers, but act as a police force against the working class.

Since fall 2020, the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Committee has been organizing educators throughout the state and region to fight on the basis of the needs of educators, students and the communities, in opposition to the homicidal pandemic policies that represent the interests of the rich. For more information about joining this fight, email the committee at paedrankandfile@gmail.com, text (412) 336-8245 or visit this page.



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