

Omicron surge intensifies crisis in Washington state public schools

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The rapid spread of the Omicron variant in Washington state is deepening the crisis in public education and threatening to provoke an independent movement of educators and parents to close schools in order to prevent further COVID-19 infections.

Last week, as Seattle Public Schools headed into winter break, the district wrote to parents, “Uncertainty at any time is challenging, but no more so than now, after the stress and anxiety of the last several weeks.” It added, “We are sharing this information with you now so you can be as ready as possible should your child need to switch to remote learning.” Similar messages were sent to families in other districts in the state, and local press ran multiple articles on this theme.

Last Thursday, there were 5,214 official COVID-19 cases across Washington, the third-highest figure during the entire pandemic and the highest since December 7, 2020. King County reported 2,879 cases that day, more cases than has ever been recorded in the county in one day. Scientists have determined that the Omicron variant is now causing 80 percent of new cases in the Seattle area and is dominant statewide, as across the United States.

The University of Washington’s Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) predicts that daily new cases in Washington could surpass 38,000 in February 2022, more than 20 times the current seven-day average of daily new cases.

For the week of December 11–17, there were 135 COVID-19 cases recorded in Seattle schools, an increase of 69 from the week prior, the largest one-week increase since the start of the pandemic.

The district’s and teachers union’s uncompromising insistence on in-person learning, regardless of the rate of infection, has led to teachers and staff independently struggling for their own lives and safety.

Two weeks ago, three separate Seattle-area schools were forced to close for two days, primarily due to the

pandemic but also after threats of violence directed at the school. At Cleveland High School, which experienced its largest one-week increase in COVID-19 cases among students and staff, teachers organized a wildcat sickout strike that forced the school to close.

One month before, on November 12, the Bellevue, Seattle and Kent school districts closed due to widespread staffing shortages that have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Conditions in the schools were crisis-ridden before Omicron was announced. Staffing shortages, lack of funding, insufficient pay in one of the most expensive regions in the US and numerous infections of students and staff in the schools have emotionally and physically exhausted educators.

The Kent, Seattle and Bellevue Education Associations have not initiated any of the school closures or endorsed the independent actions of educators. In fact, the Bellevue Education Association seeks to normalize educators’ experience of dangerous and traumatizing working conditions, tweeting on December 4 a “Learning for Justice Toolkit,” which “aids educators in the exploration of the fatigue, burnout and even the trauma they may experience when helping students who are suffering.”

On November 12, the Seattle Education Association (SEA) posted nothing on its Facebook page, website or Twitter account indicating why educators were not coming to schools that day, instead claiming that the closure was “caused not by SEA educators but by a statewide shortage of substitutes.” The union demanded that educators do the impossible and “provide COVID-safe, quality services and learning for all of our students.”

In the aftermath of the horrific November 30 school shooting at Oxford High School in Michigan, students issued threats of violence at Cleveland, Bothell and Franklin High Schools, all of which are in the Seattle area.

Franklin High School closed December 15 after a violent threat from a student was discovered on social media. Administration closed the school on Wednesday, December 15, but Seattle Public Schools demanded that staff remain in the building “as normal” the next day. Teachers and staff were determined to remain safe, and closed the school by calling in sick *en masse*, since the source of the threat had not been identified. Educators who took part in the sickout wrote a statement that reads in part: “The message was clear that it was more important to Seattle Public Schools that they can monitor the staff than it was to protect them, even when there are no students present in the building.”

Tragedies such as the Oxford High School shooting are becoming ever more frequent in the US and exacerbating the deep-going crisis of public education. In 2021, there have been 222 school shootings, double the figure in 2019 and 10 times higher than a decade ago. Conditions of perpetual war, growing inequality, massive social displacement, the under-funding of schools, and now the pandemic have all contributed to the rise of school shootings.

While teachers and staff have taken the initiative to defend their lives, the unions have refused to support them. In fact, after colluding with the districts to unsafely reopen schools at the start of the semester, they have concealed the catastrophic situation faced by educators from every other section of the working class in the US and internationally.

The independent actions Washington teachers have taken to defend themselves reflect what is taking place across the US. Teachers and staff at The School at Marygrove, a public school in Detroit, engaged in a sickout December 8 to demand improved safety measures in the aftermath of the Oxford school shooting, and to stop the spread of COVID-19.

At Olney Charter High School in Philadelphia, educators organized to force the school to switch to remote learning. They did so in the immediate aftermath of the tragic death of Alayna Thach, a 17-year-old senior at the school, who died on December 13 from COVID-19. Among those who have organized in Philadelphia include members of the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, who have been pushing for the scientifically necessary return to virtual learning for over a year.

In the face of mounting opposition among educators, the Biden administration continues to make clear that all schools must remain in-person, and that no meaningful

policy would be implemented to slow the spread of the virus. This is the policy that is dictated to the teachers unions, which they dutifully enforce. Unions such as the SEA and Bellevue Education Association will work with the districts and the state government to attempt to prevent remote-instruction regardless of the level of transmission of the Omicron variant.

The measures necessary for eliminating COVID-19 are well-known to scientists and have been successfully implemented in China. To stop the pandemic and save millions of lives, workers must demand such policies as the temporary shutdown of all non-essential production, fully virtual learning, mass testing, and robust contact tracing.

The coming Omicron wave is predicted to cause more cases and deaths than at any time in the history of the pandemic, but teachers and staff across the US and internationally are taking action independent of administration and the official unions in defense of human life. It is essential that these struggles become an internationally organized movement of the working class against the homicidal pandemic policies of the ruling class.

The Washington Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has been built to coordinate the fight for remote learning, and to unite with workers in every industry. This committee must be expanded in every school, factory and office, to carry out a struggle to place human life above profits. We urge all educators, parents and students in Washington and throughout the Pacific Northwest region who wish to become involved to sign up here today.



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