

Child COVID-19 hospitalizations quadruple in New York City as Omicron spreads

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In the three weeks since the Omicron variant of COVID-19 began to spread through New York City, the number of children aged 0-19 who were hospitalized because of COVID-19 infections has quadrupled. According to the latest figures, 109 children are now hospitalized with conditions related to COVID-19, compared to 22 in early December. Half of the children recently hospitalized were too young to be vaccinated.

The rise in severe childhood illness from COVID-19 accompanies a climb in the overall hospitalization rate in the city of 73 percent. As of December 27, 2,777 city residents have been recently hospitalized for COVID-related conditions with 348 in intensive care units. Statewide, hospitalizations surged 11 percent in just one day, from 4,891 on Christmas to 5,526 on Sunday.

New York City is in the forefront of the Omicron wave of infection sweeping across the United States. The highly infectious variant is largely responsible for the more than doubling of the seven-day average of daily new cases over the past two weeks, from 120,563 to 266,563. Pediatric hospitalization rates across the US have increased 48 percent in the last week. Since March 2020, 1,035 children 17 and younger have died from COVID-19, the majority over the past four months amid the bipartisan, union-backed campaign to fully reopen schools this fall.

An unknown number of those now being infected with Omicron, including children, will suffer long-term effects from the disease, even among those who were never hospitalized. On Monday, another 22,000 people in the city tested positive, with a test positivity rate of roughly 20 percent, indicating that many more infectious are going undetected. The latest figures show that over 1 in 50 Manhattan residents have been infected in the last two weeks.

The unfolding disaster for children in New York has been met by a “united front,” as the *New York Times* put it, of leading Democratic Party politicians committed to sending children back into school buildings when classes resume on January 3. The outgoing Democratic mayor of New York,

Bill de Blasio, the Democratic governor of the state, Kathy Hochul, and incoming Democratic Mayor Eric Adams, appeared at a news conference on Tuesday morning to lie about the safety of schools and the need to keep them open.

In announcing his “Stay Safe, Stay Open” plan, de Blasio said, “We start with a reminder that our schools have been extraordinarily safe—bluntly, the safest places to be in New York City, very low levels of COVID.”

Bluntly, the mayor was lying. His claim is based on the small percentage of students that are actually tested in the schools, supposedly 10 percent weekly but, in reality, far fewer since only a small number of students have ever turned in the required parental consent form.

Since September, when the schools opened, educators have been demanding more frequent testing, which the de Blasio administration cut in half. The farcical character of the program is well known in the school system. “It’s the same 10 kids tested over and over in my school,” as one educator said to the *World Socialist Web Site*. Before the Omicron surge, one parents group estimated that only 14 percent of positive cases in 5–18-year-olds in the city were discovered by testing in school. The rest came from independent tests administered by the city outside of the schools or by private testing services.

De Blasio also announced that the amount of in-school testing would double and will include both vaccinated and unvaccinated students. The city will ask, but not require, that students be tested before they return to school on January 3. In an implementation of the national “test to stay” program of the Centers for Disease Controls and Prevention (CDC), entire classrooms will no longer be quarantined when there is an outbreak in a school, and students who test negative will be required to remain in class.

On this basis, the three Democratic politicians proceeded to emphasize again and again that not only are the schools physically safe, but they must be opened for the mental health of children. De Blasio referred to the “failed experiment … with remote teaching” in 2020 and proceeded to promote vaccination as the magic bullet to stop the

pandemic.

Governor Hochul claimed, “We could avert all this if every child were vaccinated. We still have time.” This is an absurdity, as the number of infections from the Omicron variant climbs daily and large numbers of unvaccinated children will return to school in less than a week, long before any child vaccinated today will have full protection against the virus.

On Monday, Hochul announced that not only was New York state implementing the CDC’s deadly scaling down of quarantine for health care workers who test positive from 10 to five days, but was adding a category of “essential workers”—which presumably includes teachers—to the five-day isolation period.

Adams’ presence at the event made it clear that there will be no change in course on school openings or any other city pandemic policy. Adams began his remarks by cutting to the chase: “Not only our schools, but our businesses, must be open... We must reopen our city and we can do that.”

Behind the endless and phony repetition of the word “safe” in relation to schools lies the impulse of keeping them “open.” No one who pays attention—and many educators and parents follow the plans of the Democratic Party politicians closely—believes that safety is a priority. Millions have learned in the last two years, if they did not already know it, that this is a gang of corporate-funded liars. The proposal to open the largest American school district of nearly one million children is nothing less than murderous.

The reaction to the broadcast of the press conference on the mayor’s Twitter feed of this event was scathing:

“We’re at 20% positivity rate you psychopath,” said one parent.

A mother of four added. “Stop lying schools ARE NOT SAFE! I RECEIVE CONFIRMED CASE UPDATES ALMOST DAILY!”

“You’ve ruined the city beyond repair. And now deblasio 2.0 is coming into office to ruin it some more. You’re all a joke. SHUT THE SCHOOLS FOR TWO WEEKS! STOP BEING SCARED,” added another.

Another parent commented, “I am very upset at the NY state and NYC response to Covid. I am very worried about sending my children back to school. This is not enough.”

Another wrote, “@ericadamsfornyc @NYCMayor can talk about what ‘the numbers’ show on school covid safety all they want, but the reality is that our BK [Brooklyn] K-5 school had 18 cases in a week, NOT ONE of which was posted on the @NYCSchools dashboard. The numbers are fake, and they’re lying.”

As to the supposed mental health benefits of learning face-to-face during a pandemic, one teacher commented on the de Blasio tweet: “Attendance is abysmal at best and the kids

aren’t learning bc they are terrified. One of my kids told me his dad was on a ventilator bc of covid. Kids parents lost their jobs, got covid, died, etc. Then there is gun violence all over the place in the DOE [New York City Department of Education]. The kids that show up are checked out. Everyone is collectively terrified and [people] in my building call themselves sacrifices at this point.”

One New York City parent told the WSWS simply that her reaction to the plans of the city was “not to return to school on Jan 3rd, to give us remote learning until COVID-19 and this new variant is over.”

A Brooklyn middle school teacher commented, “De Blasio’s claims about the schools are all built on lies because they’re not even testing 10 percent of the kids. How does that make any sense? Now they say they’re going to test teachers? We’ve seen how that works. You have to fill out a consent form with a link that doesn’t work, and you have to do it three days ahead of the test date which you don’t know because they come randomly. And also where is [United Federation of Teachers president Michael] Mulgrew? I was starting to talk to the other teachers about a sickout because this is outrageous.”

These comments are only a small indication of the social explosion that is building in New York City. A direct confrontation by the working class with the Democratic Party and the trade unions has become inevitable.

Everything that can be done must be done to give this movement a socialist, scientifically grounded, and politically and organizationally independent character. Parents, educators and students in New York City who seek to organize to keep schools closed and stop the spread of Omicron should sign up to join the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.



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