

Maryland State Board of Education passes proposal to loosen mask regulations in schools as state sees record infections

Pete Salmon

30 December 2021

On December 7, the Maryland State Board of Education, by a 12–1 margin, passed a new rule allowing local school districts in the state to determine whether to maintain mask mandates in schools. The measure must be approved by the Maryland General Assembly's Joint Committee on Administrative, Executive & Legislative Review before it can take effect.

“It provides us a way forward that does give off-ramps... Ultimately, everyone needs to be working in that same direction, to find a way that we can finally get rid of the masks,” proclaimed board member Lori Morrow, who introduced the measure.

The new rule would give the state’s 24 school systems (23 counties, plus the city of Baltimore) the ability to end school mask mandates under three scenarios: if a respective county’s vaccination rate reaches 80 percent, if 80 percent of the students and staff at a school are vaccinated, or if the county’s transmission rate is “low” or “moderate,” under Centers for Disease Control and Prevention standards, for 14 consecutive days.

The Maryland school board decision came just before the massive wave of the highly infectious Omicron variant of COVID-19 hit the United States, causing new cases to exponentially increase. Maryland’s number of hospitalizations has almost tripled since the first confirmed cases of the Omicron variant, to 2,046 as of December 29.

The number of cases has shot up significantly as well. On December 4, daily cases in the state stood at a seven-day average of 1,340. As of December 28, the seven-day average of daily new cases is up to 6,847, a more than 500 percent increase in less than four weeks.

Two days before the new guidelines were voted on, the Maryland Department of Health was hit by a cyberattack, leaving several crucial metrics, such as daily case totals, unreported for about two weeks, further eroding any claim that the new guideline was based upon scientific data. Even though daily case figures have returned, other important metrics, most importantly daily cases by age range, have still not been restored.

With children around the world being forced back to school by the ruling class and their partners in the trade unions, they are being infected at greater rates than ever before, leaving increasing numbers suffering serious illness and death. While children aged 5–11 now have access to vaccines, vaccination rates remain very low in that age group. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, as of December 5, only 24.2 percent of 5–11-year-olds in Maryland have received at least one dose.

Maryland’s Republican Governor Larry Hogan has been at the forefront of undermining public health at the state level. Immediately following the election and inauguration of President Biden in early 2021, Hogan demanded school reopenings by March 1, falsely claiming that “there is no public health reason for school boards to be keeping students out of school” and that “school reopenings do not contribute to community spread and increased hospitalizations.”

In August 2020, Hogan clashed with Montgomery County health officer Dr. Travis Gayles after Gayles ordered that the ban on in-person learning be extended to private schools within the county. Hogan responded with an order barring blanket closures of schools. Although the county initially defied this order, they

gave in a week later.

On July 1 of this year, Hogan ended Maryland's statewide mask mandate, along with all other COVID-19 emergency measures. As a result, cases in the state went from a seven-day average of 57 a day on July 1 to over a thousand a day by August 22.

Furthermore, Hogan attempted to cut off supplemental enhanced federal unemployment benefits in July, citing the growing vaccination rate in the state and job openings. This move was blocked by a Baltimore Circuit Court judge on July 13, allowing the program to continue until the national program ended in September.

The disregard for the lives of the working class is not merely limited to the Republican governor. Across the country and around the world, the ruling class is doing all it can to keep schools and workplaces open while the Omicron variant rages.

On Monday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lowered quarantine guidelines from 10 days to five based on test results and symptoms. This has been done in order to promote the lie that the population will likely have to live with COVID-19 in order to protect capitalist profits.

The Maryland school board's decision to move towards ending mask mandates follows the lead of numerous states which dropped such mandates for schools last summer. On May 3, Florida Republican Governor Ron DeSantis signed an executive order barring even local jurisdictions from making their own COVID-19 decisions, including mask mandates. When the Delta variant hit in July, daily cases surged to over 20,000 per day. Arkansas, Louisiana and other states within the southern United States which lifted statewide school mask mandates saw cases rise rapidly, even before the Omicron variant hit.

The dropping of mask mandates in schools will have devastating consequences for students, teachers and other school personnel. While the Biden administration continues to push vaccination as the only solution to the pandemic, the Omicron variant severely weakens their effectiveness. Other public health measures are vitally necessary to protect the population, including the temporary closure of schools and non-essential workplaces, with full income to workers, along with a robust contact tracing and isolation program, massive upgrades in ventilation systems, and the use of high-

quality masks.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact