

K-12 schools forced open across the US amid Omicron surge

Renae Cassimeda**4 January 2022**

Amid what are already catastrophic conditions, the entire political establishment, the corporate media and the unions are forcing millions of children back into schools this week, threatening to vastly accelerate the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic. Feigning concern over the “learning loss” and mental health impacts of remote learning on students, public officials continue to promote the lie that schools are safe.

On Monday, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) released its weekly report on child infections, hospitalizations and deaths, recording a staggering 325,340 official cases among children during the week ending December 30. This is a record figure and nearly 100 percent higher than the week prior, primarily due to the rapid spread of the Omicron variant.

Hospitalizations also skyrocketed last week, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reporting a record average of 574 children hospitalized each day during the week ending January 1, a 95.7 percent increase from the week prior. Additionally, the CDC has recorded 1,040 official child deaths from COVID-19 since the onset of the pandemic.

On Sunday, Dr. Anthony Fauci claimed in an interview on NBC that mask mandates and testing guidelines make it “safe enough to get kids back to school, balanced against the deleterious effects of keeping them out.”

On Monday morning, US Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona reiterated the lie that schools are “safe” in a tweet stating: “Schools around the country are making a safe return to school happen. All because of the hard work of educators & school staff – and fueled by the American Rescue Plan.” Replies to Cardona’s tweet have been overwhelmingly critical and express opposition to the actual conditions in schools which have not implemented adequate safety measures, instead allowing for the virus to rip through schools and surrounding communities.

New York City, the largest district in the US, with over 1 million students, forced open schools Monday morning amid an ongoing explosion of cases throughout the city, the epicenter of the Omicron surge in the US. As of January 3, the seven-day average of daily new cases is over 61,000, a 283 percent rise over the past two weeks, with the positivity rate at a staggering 33.7 percent and increasing.

In order to keep schools and workplaces open amid mass opposition among concerned parents and staff to the reopening of schools, political officials and union leaders have made every effort to downplay the dangers that Omicron poses. During a

Monday morning press briefing, New York City Mayor Eric Adams lied to parents, stating: “We want to be extremely clear: the safest place for children is in a school building. And we are going to keep our schools open.”

Hundreds of thousands of parents refused to follow the mayor’s diktat and kept their children at home Monday, while large numbers of staff stayed at home either due to infection or in opposition to the reckless reopening plans. New York City Department of Education (DOE) student attendance records for Monday show that the rate of attendance was only 67 percent for the district, meaning that a third of all students were absent from in-person school.

A New York City high school teacher shared on social media that 17 teachers were not at her school site Monday, while only 48 students out of over 200 showed up at school. Another educator expressed opposition to the district and the complacency of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), noting: “In case you weren’t sure just how f***ed NYC teachers and children are, 40 percent of COVID tests administered in the neighborhood I teach in came back positive. There’s going to be multiple latent positive covid cases in each class I teach, and UFT isn’t doing anything to stop it.”

Another educator commented: “Heart is breaking listening to our school’s parents terrified to send their children in. They are desperate for remote options. Kids are sick. Families are sick. More than we know. We can’t staff our school. NYC Schools, NYC Mayor continue to say everything is fine. We’re not OK.”

A middle school teacher in Brooklyn spoke with the *World Socialist WebSite* about the conditions at school Monday and the slashing of mitigation measures. She said: “Many staff and students were out today. I heard that several staff and approximately six students tested positive over the break. No tests were given or handed out. Midday, they handed out three N95 masks to each teacher.

“At the after-school meeting, the principal explained to us how quarantining is being eliminated. If we have symptoms or are exposed, we will be given a rapid test. Basically, she explained to us how mitigations are being cut. She said she attended a meeting with the chancellor where she was told the numbers show that kids are safer in school.

“The school nurse was outraged and began shouting, ‘This makes no sense! The policy is full of holes.’ Everyone agreed. The principal said she was helpless. She is not allowed to shut down

classes or the school. Many staff and students have not shown up at school today due to COVID-19 infection, quarantine or in opposition to the unsafe conditions in schools."

Facing a crisis in staffing shortages, the DOE is prepared to implement further reckless policies in order to keep schools running. For instance, New York state quarantine guidelines note that fully vaccinated K-12 staff can return to campus six days after testing positive, even if suffering from "mild symptoms." Such unscientific policies have no basis in public health and will only result in further transmission of the virus.

During a local news interview Monday morning, UFT President Michael Mulgrew voiced his support for reopening and a callous indifference to the lives of New York City educators and staff, stating, "Our concern is staffing over the next couple of days because we don't know what's going to happen in terms of the adults who are going to go to work because we know that this variant is quite pervasive."

Already inadequate mitigation measures have been slashed for students. The district eliminated its prior policy of at-home quarantining for entire classrooms exposed to COVID-19, and instead allows exposed children to stay in school if they test negative once and remain asymptomatic. Consent for testing also poses an immense issue in New York City, as only around 300,000 families out of a student population of over 1 million have consented to on-site testing of their children.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the third-largest district in the US, with over 340,000 students, also reopened schools Monday. According to the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) the seven-day average of daily new cases now stands at 4,591 and is rising. The CDPH data also shows the high rate of infection among children, with around one in four new infections in kids.

In a survey issued to union members over winter break, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) wrote, "It is imperative that we return from our winter break with a plan to ensure school communities' and our own safety," and asked teachers what kind of job action they would be willing to engage in. In response, 91 percent of the union members said they would participate in a "remote work action."

Despite the very real opposition expressed in the survey findings, the CTU told members to report to work in-person Monday and said that any calls for remote learning would come later in the week. Despite their posturing as a "radical" union, the CTU will follow the same playbook they did in the spring 2021 semester and force educators back into unsafe schools.

In Florida, Miami-Dade Public Schools (MDPS), the fourth-largest district in the US, with nearly 350,000 students, returned to schools Monday. The test positivity rate in Miami-Dade County is a highly elevated 27 percent and rising, indicating very high transmission rates in the area. In response to the recent surge in infections, MDPS merely reinstated mask mandates for school staff, encouraged the use of mask for students and pledged to increase surface cleaning. Such an openly unscientific safety policy will allow for the virus to rip through schools unchecked.

Due to increasing transmission rates and major shortages in staffing across the US, a growing number of districts were forced to temporarily switch to remote learning this week. According to

the school closings tracker on burbio.com, at least 3,229 schools were forced to delay in-person reopening this week.

Detroit Public Schools (DPS) has temporarily shifted to remote learning until January 14 given a major surge in cases. Detroit's test positivity rate has exceeded 40 percent and is increasing. DPS is still requiring all clerical staff, school nurses, security guards, greeters, food and nutrition staff, parent outreach coordinators, bus attendants, contracted engineers, custodians and paraeducators to report to work in-person on Thursday.

Staff shortages due to COVID-19 have also caused school closures across the US. Several school districts throughout Connecticut announced closures Monday, due to staffing shortages. Duram School District in Davenport, Iowa, closed Monday due to a bus driver shortage. The district was already short 10 bus drivers and reported that 14 percent of staff called in sick with COVID-19 on Monday.

The present mass shortage of school staff comes alongside mass shortages among health care workers, firefighters and other sections of workers. The holiday season and the encouragement of travel has led to mass infections across the US.

In October, *Education Week* released data from a survey of K-12 administrators that found deep shortages in staffing, with 77 percent of those surveyed expressing saying they face moderate to severe staffing shortages. With the rapid spread of Omicron, mass staffing shortages in K-12 schools will only intensify as educators and staff continue to leave the profession or become infected while at work.

Every effort must be made to immediately halt the spread of COVID-19 in schools and switch to online learning, which must be fully funded through a 100 percent tax on the wealth accumulated by the pandemic profiteers. Every section of the ruling elite has lined up to support a policy of mass infection in the interests of private profits. Workers must organize independently and build rank-and-file committees to put a stop to these criminal policies.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact