

K-12 schools reopen as Omicron surges throughout the US South

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5 January 2022

Amid the record-breaking surge of COVID-19 cases in the United States and throughout the world due to the spread of the highly transmissible Omicron variant, infections are on the rise again in states across the Southern US just as K-12 schools reopen for the spring semester.

Daily new cases have been at record highs for weeks and, according to data from Johns Hopkins University, a staggering 1.08 million new cases were officially recorded in the US on Monday, by far the highest daily total for any country since the start of the pandemic.

Data from the last week of December showed a 58 percent rise in COVID-19 hospitalizations of school-aged children nationwide. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), fewer than 25 percent of children under the age of 18 are fully vaccinated, with children 5 years old and younger ineligible to be vaccinated. The reopening of schools during the current surge will compound the tragedy of pediatric illness and death due to COVID-19 in the new year.

An alarming rise in child cases occurred during the last week in December, just before schools reopened from the winter holiday. Data from the American Association of Pediatrics shows 324,340 new cases during the week ending December 30. Over 20,000 of those cases occurred in Southern states in HHS Region 4, which includes states in the Southeast and Deep South.

Pediatric hospitalizations have also skyrocketed by over 114 percent across the US, as the CDC notes an average of 672 hospitalizations among children on any given day during the week ending January 2.

While the Biden administration falsely claims to follow the science, it has totally abdicated responsibility for the health and well-being of students and staff as they resume in-person instruction amid what many scientists are predicting will be a tsunami of infection for both the unvaccinated and vaccinated. In a meeting with the nation's governors on December 27, President Biden told them, "There is no federal solution" to the ongoing crisis of the pandemic. He continued, "This gets solved at the state level."

Governors and state legislatures across much of the South have banned or impeded policies and procedures that allow schools to enforce even the most limited mitigation measures such as wearing masks, social distancing, testing, and limiting attendance to indoor events.

Despite the precipitous acceleration of COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations in school-aged children, schools throughout the Southern states are returning to in-person instruction with few if any adjustments to the protocols that were in place to protect staff and students before the winter holiday.

In **Florida**, cases have surged over 500 percent in the past two weeks as average daily new cases hover around 43,000. Miami-Dade County Public Schools, the 4th largest district in the US with nearly 350,000 students, resumed in-person classes Monday. Due to the recent surge in cases, the district updated their safety protocols on December 31, merely issuing a mask mandate for all staff while keeping masks optional for students. Citing Republican Governor Ron DeSantis's order that wearing masks is optional for students, the district recommends cloth face coverings for students despite the recent recommendation from scientists for the use of N-95 masks.

On January 1, **Georgia** reported over 18,880 new cases, a record figure during the entire pandemic. In the seven days leading up to December 30, new cases in children aged 0-4 increased 231 percent; new cases in the 5-17 age range increased 193 percent in the same period. A little more than half of the population in the state is fully vaccinated.

There has been a statewide ban on mask mandates in Georgia, but due to the surge, Republican Governor Brian Kemp recently allowed individual school districts to require that staff and students wear masks. The state's largest school district, Atlanta Public Schools, has a 58 percent vaccination rate. In light of the record-breaking surge in cases, Atlanta and surrounding school districts have returned to remote learning for the first week of the new semester.

Last week, **Louisiana** saw a 150 percent increase of COVID-19 hospitalizations and record numbers of new

infections. Jefferson Parish saw a 223 percent rise in new cases in the week ending December 29, while hospitalizations increased by 142 percent. Only 50 percent of all Louisianans are fully vaccinated.

As of December 30, Democratic Governor John Bel Edwards has not reinstated a mask mandate, although schools in New Orleans continue to have a mask requirement for staff and students. As of this week, masks will be required in all Jefferson Parish government buildings regardless of vaccination status. Jefferson Parish Schools, the largest school district in the area, resumed instruction in a mask-optional setting.

In **Tennessee**, the test positivity rate is now 34 percent, climbing at a rate more than twice as fast as any other point in the pandemic, according to the Tennessee Department of Public Health. Pediatric hospitalizations jumped 66 percent in the five days from December 24 to December 29. Children between the ages of 0-17 make up 22 percent of new infections in Shelby County, where Memphis, the largest city in the state, is located.

In August 2021, Shelby County Schools sued Republican Governor Bill Lee for the right to impose a mask mandate in schools after the Governor signed an executive order allowing parents to opt out of masking. Only 50 percent of the county is fully vaccinated. While Memphis students will resume instruction wearing masks, municipal schools in the county still enforce mask optional policies. Currently, only 5 out of 95 Tennessee counties mandate masks in schools.

South Carolina presently has a 30 percent test positivity rate. Republican Governor Henry McMaster issued a ban on mask mandates in schools which was subsequently blocked in federal court. Currently, 55 percent of South Carolinians are fully vaccinated.

In Greenville County, the largest school district in the state, masks are required for anyone showing COVID symptoms. Otherwise, the district's Continuity of Service Plan states that "Students, employees, and visitors may choose to wear masks within GCS facilities." The district has also grotesquely applied the recent CDC changes in quarantine and isolation guidelines for adults to school children as well. Students who test positive for COVID-19 or are exposed to infected classmates may return to campuses after five days.

Alabama is also seeing record COVID-19 case numbers, with a test positivity rate of 38.5 percent. All 67 counties in the state are experiencing high levels of community transmission. The current surge has forced multiple school districts in the state to begin the semester with remote learning this week. During the week prior to winter holiday, there was a 25 percent increase in COVID-19 cases in schools. Alabama's Republican Governor Kay Ivey has

imposed no requirement for masking or other safety protocols in schools.

In **Texas**, COVID-19 hospitalizations have more than doubled over the past week due to the ongoing surge in cases, while the test positivity rate in the state is over 34 percent. Pediatric COVID-19 cases have risen upwards of 22 percent in some counties since December 25, yet students and staff are back in classrooms with no new measures to limit the spread of Omicron.

Multiple school districts, including Round Rock Independent School District in Austin, reopened schools this week despite overwhelming numbers of staff out sick with the virus. Governor Abbott has banned school districts from implementing mask mandates in schools, though some districts have defied his order.

The ruling elite has doubled down on measures to keep the economy open regardless of the amount of death or mass infection. As Drs. Walensky and Fauci mince words about the cause of the steep rise in pediatric COVID-19 hospitalizations, children in the Southern US are crowding back into school buses and classrooms with fewer protections against a more highly transmissible virus than at any other point of the pandemic.

The only way the pandemic will be brought to an end is through the independent mobilization of educators, school staff, parents, and the broader working class against the murderous policies of the ruling elite. At every step of the way, the teachers unions have facilitated the homicidal school reopening campaign. Educators and school staff must take the initiative and form their own rank-and-file committees in every school district, to unify with educators and workers across the US and internationally.



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