

Week two of forced in-person school begins in Massachusetts amid record COVID case counts

Andrew Timon, Julian James
9 January 2022

In the first week of classes in 2022, with record COVID-19 cases, teacher absences and disrupted classes, students and teachers faced an unprecedented surge of the pandemic in schools across Massachusetts. Despite these dangerous conditions, Governor Charlie Baker and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) have mandated that K-12 schools remain open for in-person learning.

School district administrators who have temporarily closed schools have been threatened with audits, and any school that does go remote will not have those days count toward the 180 required days of learning.

On January 8, Massachusetts reached a 7-day average of 19,902 COVID-19 cases per day, and a 7-day weighted average positivity rate of 23.02 percent.

Waste water samples taken 3–7 times per week to test the amount of SARS-CoV-2 RNA copies have seen the 7-day average increase nearly sixfold, from the previous week's tally of just over 2,000 RNA copies/mL in early December to nearly 12,000. Previously, the highest number reached, at the height of the Delta wave, was just 1,500.

Hospitalizations have been increasing by over 100 people a day since the end of December. As of January 6, 2,637 people, 1,106 of whom were fully vaccinated, were hospitalized with COVID-19. Emergency and intensive care systems are already reaching their limits. Dr. Melisa Lai-Becker, medical director for the emergency department at Cambridge Health Alliance's Everett Hospital, told WGBH she spent much of Monday "searching for an ICU bed for one of our patients, and every single facility is full." Hospitals reached in neighboring states by Dr. Lai-Baker were also overwhelmed, with little to no beds available.

At UMass Memorial Medical Center in Worcester, hospital epidemiologist Dr. Richard Ellison said that some patients are being cared for in hallways, with privacy barriers put up between beds. "There is no bed capacity right now in the UMass system," he told WGBH. "As soon as

someone gets discharged, the bed is being filled immediately."

With case numbers from Omicron currently rising at an exponential rate, the state's medical system is on the brink of triaging patients, whereby hospital staff may be tasked with choosing who will live or die based on on-the-spot assessments of which patients are most likely to survive. Under this system, the elderly and those with preexisting conditions face lower odds of receiving care.

Despite the predictability and scale of the unfolding disaster, the mitigation efforts implemented by the state have been uncoordinated and delayed at best, with a one-time distribution of approximately 227,000 testing kits to schools. The non-medical masks distributed were found not to be 95 percent, but only 25-48 percent effective, a fact that was flatly denied by Baker. DESE released a statement January 5 announcing that the masks are still considered to be "highly effective," citing the CDC's effective mask wearing recommendations, which include non-medical cloth masks that have been shown to offer little if any protection from SARS-CoV-2.

DESE is also using the unscientific CDC guidelines reducing the quarantine of positive cases from 10 days to 5, which will lead to many positive teachers and students forced back into schools. According to DESE guidelines, individuals who test positive are to "return to school after 5 days and once they have been without fever for 24 hours (and without taking fever-reducing medications); and experienced improvement in other symptoms." They add these individuals "must mask for 5 additional days when around others." *"Even with a 5-day isolation period, repeat viral testing prior to return is not recommended,"* DESE says (emphasis added).

Against the backdrop of full ICUs and record case numbers, the governor declared Thursday, "Kids need to be in school, school is safe," adding that keeping kids out of school did terrible damage to kids all over the country. "It's

not going to happen in Massachusetts,” even as study after study has shown that schools provide ideal conditions for the virus to spread, infecting and potentially hospitalizing and killing students and staff.

Teachers unions, which both campaigned for and then helped implement the back-to-school drive of the Biden administration, have offered no resistance to these homicidal policies or fought for the resources for high-quality remote learning. Instead, they make mild protests about how mitigation measures such as mask distribution and the state’s failed efforts to deliver rapid tests to teachers before school openings have been mismanaged, as if those measures alone would have stemmed the avalanche of infections taking place in schools.

In an end-of-year statement, the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) called for the closing of schools on January 3 so teachers and staff could use the day for COVID testing. MTA President Merrie Najimy wrote, “The last-minute scramble by the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to provide 200,000 test kits to educators” was “jeopardizing our attempts to maintain safe in-person learning as schools reopen after the holiday break.”

She added, “In this moment, there may be further instances when in-person learning is temporarily deemed too risky, and it is time for the department to show flexibility and leadership in this area.” With cases three times higher than any other point in the pandemic and hospital and ICU beds filling up across the state, it’s worth asking the MTA president: If not in this moment, when would in-person learning be declared “too risky”?

On January 10, 2021, Boston Teachers Union (BTU) President Jessica Tang signed a “Side Letter Concerning Reopening Schools and Returning Students to Schools When the COVID Positive Rate is 5% or Above.” Its aim was to force teachers back into unsafe schools to teach all grade levels, regardless of the COVID positivity rate in Boston. The previously agreed-upon rate was 4 percent, which was then raised without explanation to 5 percent with the agreement of the BTU, the City of Boston and the Boston Public Schools superintendent.

The “Side Letter” stated that “if the positivity rate for COVID-19 is above 10% [Boston’s rate is now more than twice that] for two weeks BTU may request impact bargain [sic] regarding any impacts from the COVID-19 positivity rate on BTU’s members’ terms and conditions of employment.” In other words, teachers must stay in schools while BTU leaders may, if they choose, return to the bargaining table to raise demands for a return to remote teaching.

A BTU member bulletin from February 2, 2021, said

teachers have “no right to opt to remain working remotely only. Members who are directed in despite their preference or necessity may choose to take a leave, according to all applicable policies”—in other words, by using their sick days or taking unpaid leave.

The push to kennel students in schools is a determined effort on the part of big business and the ruling elite to force parents back into the workplace to continue to produce profits for the owners. This policy is being coordinated by the political establishment with the help of unions in states across the country.

Yet teachers and students are beginning to move independently against these criminal policies and against the unions who support them. In Chicago, teachers in the nation’s third-largest school system are defying Democratic Party Mayor Lori Lightfoot’s demands that they return to classrooms under conditions in which nearly one out of every four city residents are testing positive for COVID-19, with children aged 17 and under suffering the highest rates. Lightfoot, who has threatened to fine teachers for an “illegal strike,” canceled classes for 330,000 students for the third straight day after teachers voted by 73 percent Tuesday night to begin virtual-only instruction.

To contain the pandemic, a “Zero COVID” policy involving universal testing, contact tracing, isolation of infected patients, masking and vaccinations is urgently needed, alongside the temporary shutdown of schools and nonessential workplaces to break the chain of infection, with full income going to all affected. Such measures will be brought about only through the development of a mass movement of the international working class.

Massachusetts teachers must form rank-and-file safety committees independent of the unions, guided by what is necessary for saving lives and preventing lifelong debilitation in children. Rank-and-file committees of educators have already been established in New York City, Chicago, California, Texas, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Alabama and Oregon, and are connected to committees in the UK, Canada, Australia, Germany and Sri Lanka. Contact us today to form a rank-and-file committee at your school or workplace.



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