

Students in Portland, Oregon issue call to action to close schools

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13 January 2022

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) encourages high school youth to contact us today to share the conditions in your school and to get involved in the fight against unsafe school reopenings!

As the Omicron variant continues to surge throughout the US, significant opposition has developed to the unsafe reopening of schools among students, educators and parents.

Portland Public Schools (PPS) students at Cleveland High School in Oregon, issued an open letter last week in response to the massive rise in infections in their school. The students called for the closure of their school and a return to online learning in response to the surge in Omicron cases.

The letter reads in part:

This is a call to action from the students at Cleveland High School. We believe that for the safety of ourselves, our families, and the staff members, school should transfer to online for at least the next 2 weeks. As we all know, omicron is extremely contagious and currently tearing through our community. Attendance rates are extremely low in all of our classes and students are experiencing extreme anxiety in our current situation. OHSU has predicted that in our county omicron will peak in the next 3 weeks resulting in a much safer school environment after that time period.

Many students and family members are at high risk and for the sake of our county's health, we can protect against unnecessary and extremely rapid spreading by transferring online. The current guidelines for students are

confusing and anxiety inducing. We are receiving emails saying that we have been exposed yet still told to stay in school if we are vaccinated, despite the proof that vaccinated individuals are able to contract the new variant.

After this letter was shared with the district administration and the Portland Teachers Association, Cleveland High School was forced to close due to understaffing, as teachers, bus drivers and substitute teachers contracted the virus in record numbers. Recently, PPS teachers initiated a wildcat sickout action.

Presently in PPS, at least 973 students and 160 staff members are infected with COVID-19, according to the district COVID-19 Dashboard. Due to lack of adequate testing in the district, these numbers are undoubtedly far higher.

Late Monday afternoon, the Vancouver School District announced it will be switching temporarily to hybrid learning due to staffing shortages. Several schools will have remote learning four days a week for the next three weeks due to a lack of bus drivers caused by the spread of the virus.

In the Parkrose School District in Portland, six schools have been forced to close due to staffing shortages. Durham Elementary School in the Tigard-Tualatin School District closed Monday in preparation for virtual instruction. Many more schools across Oregon are also beginning to close in response to the surge in infection.

One Portland high school student said on Facebook that they “do not feel safe here. Kids are catching covid every day and still attending school so they don't miss out on sports and class. If I don't come to school, I fail

and if I do come I risk catching covid. I'd like to know how you plan to handle this because it's almost finals and all of my teachers are out sick and idk how I'm gonna be able to prepare for finals."

Schools across the Pacific Northwest have also closed due to the sheer number of COVID-19 infections taking place among staff and students.

So far, Franklin High School and Kimball Elementary School in the Seattle Public School system have been forced to close since Monday due to staff shortages. According to the KUOW, a local news media outlet, school staff at Kimball said there were so many special education workers absent that two students were left unattended and "in grave danger." It also reported that Franklin High School had about 30 to 50 percent of students absent, and many educators called in sick.

While there is no current data on education worker absentees, school closures throughout the Pacific Northwest make entirely clear the high level of infection among staff and students. Undoubtedly, it is also the case that many teachers, opposed to the unsafe conditions in their workplaces, are engaging in sickouts as the highly contagious Omicron variant rips through the community and the schools.

Following the line of the Biden administration to keep schools open, local officials with the help of the teacher unions are forcing educators to continue in-person instruction, despite the present dangers. Jennifer Matter, president of the Seattle Educators Association (SEA), said she is "kind of nervous" about the rise in cases, telling KUOW that she wants the schools open. In order to avoid closing the schools entirely until it is safe, she is advocating that some schools "pivot" to online learning "while educators are still healthy."

The protest of high school and middle school youth is part of a broader and deepening fight by students, educators and parents calling for the closure of schools. Protests are taking shape in Oakland, California; New York City, New York; Boston, Massachusetts; and perhaps most significantly, Chicago, Illinois, where the teachers union is maneuvering to force teachers back to in-person learning despite overwhelming opposition.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality encourage youth and teachers to get in touch with us today to share the conditions in your school and learn more about joining the developing opposition of teachers and

students around the country.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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