

Hundreds of Boston students walk out to protest lack of remote learning option amid COVID-19 surge

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Hundreds of Boston public school students walked out of classes Friday morning to protest the state of Massachusetts' policy that all classes must be held in person. The lack of a remote option for students comes as the state sees a dramatic rise in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations.

Organizers said students left their classes across 11 Boston high schools at around 10:30 a.m. Boston Public Schools (BPS) officials estimated that about 600 students participated in the walkout, while organizers said other students stayed home in protest.

The protest was organized by the Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC), which is demanding the district go remote for two weeks and that these days be counted towards the state's mandate of 180 days of in-person learning. This proposal has been rejected by Republican Governor Charlie Baker and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

Friday's walkout was sparked by a Change.org petition begun by Boston Latin School senior William Hu which had gathered more than 8,000 signatures as of Friday afternoon. Students, parents and teachers—from Boston and other state districts—are among the signatories.

"Forcing students to attend in-person learning simply isn't safe. In packed conditions such as the hallway, lunchrooms and auditoriums, and given the alarming infection rate of the new Omicron variant, schools have become a literal COVID-19 breeding ground," the petition reads.

"Students every day are testing positive all around Massachusetts, posing a significant health risk to themselves as well as their loved ones. Some schools don't even strictly enforce a mask-wearing policy. Not to forget that students often live with vulnerable loved ones,

to which bringing COVID home is essentially a death sentence."

Hu says that even before the winter break he had seen the number of COVID-19 confirmed cases rise to 30 among his class of 370 students.

A student walking out at Boston Latin School told NBC Boston, "They're just pushing us in the auditorium or in the dining halls and it's just very unsafe for us." Another said, "I feel like I'd rather be safe, especially because I live with people who are immunocompromised, than risk going to school every day."

Students at New Mission High School chanted and held signs saying that there weren't enough available teachers to keep school running well. BPS reported over 1,000 staff absences last week, but insisted that not all of these employees were out sick.

COVID-19 case numbers continue to remain at record levels in Massachusetts, with the seven-day average reaching 22,978 cases per day on January 13. Hospitalizations continue to rise at a rate of nearly 100 patients per day, reaching 3,180 hospitalized patients as of January 12, according to state data.

Particularly troubling is the rate of hospitalized patients who are fully vaccinated (with at least two doses). Since the state began releasing data on fully vaccinated hospitalizations, the percent of fully vaccinated patients has remained relatively steady, at close to 33 percent of all hospitalized cases. With the new Omicron surge, however, the percent of fully vaccinated hospitalized patients has steadily increased to about 50 percent, with 1,505 of the 3,180 hospitalized patients reported to be among the fully vaccinated.

Despite these figures, DESE continues to follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines, which have reduced the times for quarantine

and isolation from 10 days to 5 days for those testing positive, or for unvaccinated people who have come into contact with someone infected with COVID-19.

A fully vaccinated student or staff member exposed to COVID-19 does not need to quarantine or isolate. A test is not required to return to school under any of these circumstances.

Boston students held an online webinar after the walkout to discuss the issues they face in the schools. Many commenters expressed their support for the action as well as their outrage at the conditions they confront in the pandemic.

One attendee reported: “Yesterday, DESE reported 41,063 student infections for the previous week, another record total. The pool tests found 7,735 positives, and the positivity rate for pool tests was 20.1 percent.

“Yesterday’s numbers should be a red flashing light because under the old rules, a 20 percent positivity rate would have locked down buildings, no doubt about it. I hope you’ve asked Governor Baker and [DESE] Commissioner Riley, how high must the positivity rate reach before they say, ‘Okay, that’s high enough?’ Don’t let them squirm out of answering.”

Rashelle stated: “My mother was forced to give up her job with BPS due to the lack of precautions that have been taken. She was forced to make the choice of work or keeping her husband, who was severely immunocompromised, safe. I truly appreciate the activism from BSAC! Safety should always come first.”

A teacher commented: “I do not work within Boston Public Schools. However, I am a teacher in a high school outside of Boston. I fully support what you guys are doing. I am here today because I am hoping that your voices are heard.

“At the high school I work at, the COVID guidelines are very poor. Some of the classrooms do not have windows or any type of ventilations, masks are supposed to be worn, but students refuse to pull up their mask when asked. Our cafeteria is over capacity with 500 students.

“We have hundreds of cases and some of my classes have had two students. How do you recommend I go about these safety issues? I am afraid to use my voice because I do not want to lose my job. It is just completely unsafe and I am honestly afraid to work and afraid for my students and family.”

Another teacher wrote: “Teacher here—18 teachers out daily for the past two weeks with only 35 employees in the school. We are spread so thin.”

Aware and fearful of the growing anger among students,

parents and teachers over unsafe schools, BPS has been holding a series of online “COVID-19 Protocol Community Meetings.” At the most recent meeting, on Thursday, a speaker from the International Youth and Students for Social Equality said:

“Parents and students have a right to be nervous about the present situation in the schools. The Biden administration and the CDC are really lying about the coronavirus. With the Omicron variant, the cases are five or six times greater than they’ve ever been.

“Students are walking out to demand that schools go remote. This is happening in New York, here in Boston, in Oakland, California and other cities. Teachers in Chicago have been demanding that schools go remote. Teachers in France have gone on strike across the country demanding these measures.

“It’s very clear from this meeting that there are no mitigations within the schools that will stop the spread of the virus. It’s the most transmissible virus that we’ve seen. It’s spread through the air and will linger for hours via very small particles, aerosols.

“We have to see that the situation in the schools is part of a larger strategy to keep the economy going no matter the cost in human lives and sickness. We have at least a thousand children dead so far in the US from COVID. There are reports of long-term COVID in children and the risk of diabetes.

“Going remote has to be part of the discussion and to fight the policies of the government—‘herd immunity’ and ‘letting it rip’ through the community as fast as possible.”

He urged those at the webinar to visit wsws.org for information about the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic being organized by the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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