“They are focused on keeping students in school no matter how dangerous it is”: Students in Chicago speak on struggle for remote learning to save lives

Our reporters
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This week schools throughout Chicago are in disarray as they have opened for in-person instruction amid the continuing surge of the Omicron variant of COVID-19. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) officially reopened last Wednesday after the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) rammed through an agreement with Mayor Lori Lightfoot that contained no real improvements to safety and ignored teachers’ main demand for remote learning until cases are brought under control.

COVID-19 deaths in Chicago are reaching their highest point so far in the Omicron surge, with 101 deaths reported for January 18 and a seven-day average of about 40 deaths per day.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with two students—one enrolled at Northwestern University (NU) and the other an 8th grader in CPS—as well as a parent with children in the school district on conditions in schools and how the pandemic has impacted them.

Corbin, the Northwestern student, participated in a walkout this week by students at the university who are refusing to attend in-person classes while the school is reporting record numbers of positive cases.

“We’re walking out from in-person classes until the university provides virtual classes as an option to all students and takes seriously the health and well-being on immunocompromised and vulnerable students,” Corbin said.

“The last two weeks have seen our highest campus COVID numbers yet, and last week university admin announced that we will be returning to in-person classes this week. Students and other community members started a petition demanding virtual classes and KN95 masks—that the school recommended but did not provide—be provided to anyone expected to be on campus, students, staff and faculty. The petition reached 1,500-plus signatures and has been sent by many to NU admin with no acknowledgement or response.”

When asked why he thinks Northwestern and other schools are so adamant that classes remain in-person, Corbin replied, “Personally, I think Northwestern’s commitment to endangering vulnerable community members at a time like this makes complete sense when you position it within the logics of this university as an elite business project and that of the larger exploitative system.” He continued, “Northwestern needs classes to meet physically within their fancy Northwestern buildings to justify manufacturing such an exclusive and elitist product. Like all capitalist projects, they need scarcity to justify profit. Virtual classes start to collapse the whole foundation of scarcity that they bank on.

“I don’t think Northwestern’s decisions are out of line with what’s happening collectively. Millions of working people are being coerced into returning to the money machine at the expense of our physical health.”

He concluded by saying of the Northwestern protest that he hopes students “can all connect this to the larger struggle.”

Ben, an eighth grade CPS student, described the conditions in his school. “Between August 29 and January 18, my school reported about 42-50 cases total. But we have had more cases than ever during and after

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winter break. The week of returning from winter break we had about 400 students absent because they had to quarantine and/or [they] didn't even feel safe coming to school. I had COVID-19 over winter break, and my symptoms were not as bad as others."

When asked if his school's administrators are keeping students informed of the case numbers, Ben replied, "No, they are not. The only things that they say about COVID-19 at our school is to keep our masks up. The only way we really get information about COVID cases is from going to the CPS website. There are a few people who get tested every week from testers that come in, including me. The reason I choose to get tested every week was just to make sure if I get COVID, I don't spread it even more than it is now."

Ben said that while students are required to wear masks and it is strictly enforced at his school, that is not the case everywhere. "The mayor and CPS CEO's office would never follow the protocol. They are so focused on keeping students in school, no matter how dangerous it is."

Also he shared his personal experiences and loss suffered from the pandemic. "I have had COVID about two times now. Most recently I had it over winter break. My symptoms were very mild, compared to other people. Just a runny nose, sore throat, fatigue.

"I have actually experienced a death because of COVID, my grandfather. This was before the vaccines were a thing, and really before we knew much about COVID. He had major symptoms, trouble breathing, tired, major fever, chills, fatigue. COVID has a very bad effect on lungs, so he actually had pneumonia along with COVID."

Speaking on the CPS walkout held last Friday, Ben said, "I am amazed that they decided that they could actually make a change in the world. A lot of kids my age don't even really think about starting a rally or protest. I believe it was for a good cause; the students from that protest came from schools where their COVID cases at school are at a major climb."

One parent with children in the district shared her experiences as well, saying, "Fortunately my kids haven't gotten sick, but many students and teachers have gotten COVID. They [CPS] are insisting it happened outside of the school. Quite frankly it is giving me great anxiety. My five-year-old still hasn't attended kindergarten as of yet. I was hoping they would switch to virtual, but CPS said no."

She continued, "My children's school wasn't closed because they are a charter school. I wish they had walked out, but they didn't. They have the children doing spit COVID tests in class amongst each other. Very disgusting, if you ask me. It's all very disturbing. I really hope they figure something out soon. We need a new system of learning."

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Committee is organizing the fight against the pandemic and for schools to move online until the virus can be eliminated. We urge all teachers and parents to contact us and join today.

Students looking to fight back can also get involved by joining the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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