

High school students stage walkouts in Texas and Colorado amid wave of student protests

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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSEE) 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!

Across the United States, as millions of students return to unsafe classrooms amid the surge of the virulent Omicron variant, young people have taken a stand against the campaign to keep schools open even as mass infection and death spread throughout the country.

On Thursday, hundreds of students in the Round Rock School District (RRISD) just outside Austin, Texas, walked out of classes in protest of the district's COVID-19 policies. In the days leading up to the walkout, a petition started among Cedar Ridge High School students and then passed around to other high schools and middle schools gained more than 600 signatures.

RRISD students have demanded the following:

- The district reimplement contact tracing and notifies close contacts
- A mask mandate enforced
- KN95/N95 masks are to be provided in schools for every student
- Rapid or PCR tests are provided every two weeks for each person on campus
- All students are provided outdoor spaces to eat, even when it rains.

An Instagram account associated with the movement called on students to meet outside of their schools for "socially-distanced protests" after 10 a.m. before going home. Protest organizers said they were motivated by student and staff safety. According to the organizers, RRISD schools had a total of 1,116 COVID-19 cases on January 18 alone.

A Round Rock High School senior told local reporters from *KXAN News* that "things weren't going to get better until we took a stand.

"We care about student safety, we care about faculty safety, and we need the district to listen to us. We need a mask mandate that's actually enforced."

Another student expressed concerns about the possibility of getting sick.

"There are kids who don't wear masks at all throughout the day, and I don't feel safe," the student said. "I don't want to get sick and get my family sick."

On the same day students from Denver Public Schools (DPS) announced their intention to walk out of classes until the school district meets their demands for COVID-19 safety precautions.

"No student should feel scared and have to sacrifice their health or their family's health to get an education. We are speaking up and taking action so that we can be comfortable going to school," the students said in a January 12 letter outlining their concerns.

"What is on the table? Our list of what we believe are reasonable demands to keep us safe and combat the health effects both staff and students fear getting every day we attend school," they said.

Students demanded the district provide all students with masks, HEPA filtration and proper airflow in classrooms, twice-weekly COVID testing for students attending in-person learning, "integrated learning" for sick students or those wishing to stay home, and weather-protected outdoor spaces for safe lunches.

They asked the DPS "to publicly acknowledge that you will meet our demands by Jan. 20" or students would walk out of school that day "and will continue to walk until we see the change we need! We are willing to risk our education and walk out if it means we are protecting our health!"

Thursday's walkouts come in the wake of a week of similar student-led demonstrations across the US. Thousands of students from around the Chicago Public Schools system walked out of classes last Friday and marched to the system's headquarters in downtown Chicago to demand a return to remote learning and proper testing and contact tracing in schools.

Students at Franklin High School in Seattle walked out last Friday, calling for similar increased safety measures such as remote learning, free masks and testing, and daily updates to the district's COVID-19 Dashboard. Teachers at Chief Sealth International High School also staged a sickout to protest the unsafe conditions inside Seattle's public schools.

On Tuesday, hundreds of students from all eight of St. Paul, Minnesota's high schools, along with some middle school students, walked out of classrooms to protest the Saint Paul Public School (SPPS) district's resumption of in-person learning.

On the same day, students in Oakland, California, began boycotting classes over demands for stronger safety protocols in their district. Over 1,200 students from the Oakland Unified School District signed a petition demanding the transition to virtual learning unless the district provides masks to every student and provides twice-weekly rapid and PCR testing in schools.

Courageous youth are already in the process of planning future protests demanding safer classrooms, creatively mobilizing through group chats, Google Docs, and social media campaigns. Students in Broward County and Miami-Dade County in Florida are organizing walkouts with the same demands put forward by students across the US.

However, students are not alone in their struggle. Chicago schools were forced to cancel classes for five days last week when 25,000 teachers fought to cancel the resumption of in-person classes. University of Oregon graduate teachers, students, and community members rallied in support of the graduate student union calling for safer working and learning conditions.

The fight to close the schools and stem the spread of COVID is intertwined with the growing class struggle in the US and internationally, where workers and students alike demand their lives be prioritized over profit. Successfully carrying out this fight requires the expansion of rank-and-file safety committees into every

school and workplace to link up and direct the ever-growing opposition to the pandemic.



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