

North Carolina COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations skyrocket amid reckless school reopenings

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The Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees invite all educators, parents and students in the South to attend and share their experiences at our meeting this Sunday, 3 p.m. CT, titled “Pause in-person learning! Stop the spread of COVID!” To register, click here.

On Tuesday, North Carolina surpassed the grim milestone of 20,000 deaths from COVID-19 since the pandemic began just over two years ago. The number of daily new infections has repeatedly broken all-time records this month, with an all-time high of 44,833 cases reached on January 13. By comparison, the highest number of cases recorded during last winter’s surge was 12,079 on February 2, 2021.

This worsening crisis is not simply a medical event, but the outcome of the criminal policies pursued by both corporate-controlled parties, which have subordinated public health to the demands of the ruling class.

The North Carolina state government and Democratic Governor Roy Cooper have followed the lead of the Biden administration in abandoning all remaining safeguards against the rapid spread of the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2. One of the principal aims of the Biden administration and state governments controlled by both parties has been to fully reopen schools to allow parents to return to work, ensuring the production of an endless stream of profit for the large corporations and their wealthy shareholders.

The current situation in North Carolina’s schools is nothing short of catastrophic. At least twenty schools in the state have already been forced to close due to staff shortages this month as case numbers reach all-time highs.

In response to the shortage of teachers, Governor Cooper has encouraged other state employees with no teaching experience to act as substitutes, as has taken place in Michigan and other states. Under a temporary policy, any state employee who passes a background check can use paid “volunteer days” to teach, drive school buses or work in the cafeteria.

Under a law passed this summer, only individual schools—not entire districts—can go virtual. Senate Bill 654, titled “K-12 Covid-19 Provisions,” allows schools to switch temporarily to virtual instruction only when it becomes literally impossible for them to function due to staff and student absences. In this regard, it is similar to the deal of death struck between Chicago Public Schools and the pseudo-left Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which only allows for individual school closures when the campus test positivity rate among staff surpasses 30 percent.

The North Carolina law requires an immediate “return to in-person instruction as soon as personnel is available or the required quarantines are complete.” The law also limits the percentage of the student body that can be enrolled remotely to 10 percent, leaving open what is supposed to happen if an even larger percentage of schools are unable to function due to absences.

As is happening across the US, North Carolina politicians have cynically insisted that in-person education is in the best interests of students. Democratic Senator Joyce Waddell, a member of the Education/Higher Education Committee, recently insisted that “kids need to be in classrooms” and that “many students are not doing well through Zoom and at home.” Waddell claimed that “focusing on mitigating efforts like masking, social distancing and vaccines will keep students safe,” disregarding the fact that there is no consistent policy of enforcing even the most meager mitigation efforts in the state.

With the dramatically increased transmissibility of the Omicron variant, the virtual elimination of meaningful quarantines and the near total lack of adequate ventilation and filtration systems, such claims about student safety are lacking in all substance.

Before Christmas, Governor Cooper rejected all restrictions that could have slowed or stopped the spread of Omicron, limply insisting that “with every vaccine dose, we get closer to turning the tide of sickness and death brought

on by this pandemic.” With regard to schools, Governor Cooper has also insisted that “the responsible thing to do for parents is to get their child vaccinated,” despite the fact that the vaccine-only approach already had disastrous consequences in the fall.

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) has acknowledged the limited effectiveness of the vaccines in protecting against infection, pointing out that “even with highly effective vaccines, the number of post-vaccination cases is expected to rise as virus transmission goes up and as more people are vaccinated.”

In the week ending January 1, a total of 5,838,242 North Carolinians were vaccinated against COVID-19. NCDHHS has most recently reported a total of 261,364 “breakthrough” infections of COVID-19 in the state since the beginning of the pandemic.

Despite the rollout of the vaccine and its approval for ages five and older, the vaccination rate for school-aged children remains under 80 percent, with only 63 percent of children aged 5–17 considered fully vaccinated, that is, having received two doses of vaccine. Children under five remain ineligible for any vaccine.

As of January 13, 2022 the North Carolina COVID-19 Dashboard stated that there have been 2,292 cases in the child care setting and 4 deaths. This is doubtless a vast undercount given the scarce availability of testing, particularly in pediatric cases. Moreover, these numbers have not been updated in at least a week.

Along with the rise in pediatric cases, there has been a corresponding rise in pediatric hospital admissions. For example, at Mission Hospital in Asheville, North Carolina, six children are currently undergoing treatment, the highest number since the pandemic began.

Medical Officer Dr. Bill Hathaway of Mission Hospital recently told the press, “It’s not a big number but paying attention to trends like New York and Health Care Agencies across the country where there’s an increase means something.” He added, “the thought of Omicron being mild doesn’t touch on the potential for patients suffering serious complications.”

The crushing reality is that hospitals lack space and, in this context, opening schools is nothing short of homicidal. There are currently 4,689 COVID-19 patients in hospitals throughout the state. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services Protect Public Data Hub, 82.77 percent of ICU beds are in use in North Carolina and 79.02 percent of inpatient beds are in use. These high admittance rates are carried on the backs of medical professional teams who are subject to inadequate protection, patient-to-staff ratios, and overall support.

According to the UNC Program on Health Workforce

Research and Policy, the demand for nurses exceeds the supply by over 1,000, with the trend only moving forward to higher demand and a lower supply of nurses.

In September 2021, a survey was sent out by the North Carolina Nurses Association which showed severe workforce frustration, with many nurses agreeing with the statement, “the current spike in cases could have been prevented.” Many agreed that “their facilities are understaffed and their mental and emotional wellbeing is being impacted by the rise in cases.”

In the first week of January, 830 employees of Duke Health missed work after getting infected, equaling about two percent of its workforce. UNC health facilities listed more than 950 employees as absent due to COVID-19 infection or exposure requiring isolation. Shortages have been so bad that the North Carolina Emergency Medical System has to ask FEMA for ambulance strike teams due to ongoing staffing shortages and increases in service calls.

North Carolina Health News published a report in December 2021 by the COVID Collaborative study that estimated 3,626 children have lost caregivers in North Carolina. Caregivers include parents, custodial grandparents, or grandparents who live in the same household as the children.

Primary responsibility for this situation rests with the Biden administration, which has deepened and intensified the unscientific and antisocial policies of the Trump administration. Their top priority has been to keep workplaces open to ensure the steady stream of profits into the coffers of the corporations and the super rich. Workers and students must take the initiative to fight for their health and lives.

In order to stop the pandemic, there must be an immediate closure of all schools and nonessential workplaces with full income protection for affected workers, combined with widespread testing, contact tracing, isolation and quarantine of infected and exposed people, the provision of high quality N95 or better masks, and more.

Only the international working class can put an end to the pandemic. All workers who wish to take up this struggle, contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today to share the situation at your school or workplace and help to build the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) today.



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