

Chicago Public Schools covers up COVID-19 data, sparking widespread anger

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24 January 2022

Jakob Ondrey, a Chicago Public Schools (CPS) parent and the creator of the independent CPS COVID-19 Dashboard data tracking website, found that the school district had begun a coverup of its case reporting at schools before teachers and students were forced back into unsafe classrooms after the holidays.

Under the watch of Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot, CPS officials began a process of underreporting data by early January, when Ondrey noticed a clear discrepancy in the data.

The underreporting of COVID-19 data is now part of a broader trend that started in the Trump administration and has now culminated in the Biden administration's policies to end reporting of daily deaths by the Department of Health and Human Services.

The official policy nationally is now to downplay reporting of COVID-19 cases and declare the pandemic over despite over 700,000 cases daily and more than 2,000 deaths every day. A report by the Pew Research Center claims that "many state health officials say they're preparing to scale back the frequency of case count updates, possibly as soon as the current surge."

Ondrey's independent exposure of the coverup of cases in CPS mirrors these national trends. Last Thursday he broke the story on Twitter, noting, "Today I'll share the story of how [Chicago Public Schools] has been displaying different sets of COVID data to intentionally deceive parents & the public about COVID in schools. I'll share evidence about how and (shockingly) WHEN they started fudging the numbers."

Ondrey pulls raw data from CPS district servers independently using their software application programming interface (API). His analysis showed that CPS continued to report district-wide infections and cases but reporting at schools was underreported.

Individual schools would show far lower case counts, in order to convince parents and teachers that schools were safer than they appeared.

For weeks, parents and educators were already beginning to notice that the data they received from school principals did not match the data being updated by the districts for the CPS dashboard. One example Ondrey showed was at Lane Tech high school, where over 51 cases were missing, as shown below.

The investigation by Ondrey prompted an official response from CPS that acknowledged its underreporting but claimed that it did so to ensure confirmed cases and to protect the "privacy" of the students.

In an official statement, CPS explained this data suppression by claiming that it started to distinguish between "open" and "closed" cases. According to CPS, the "open" cases are not confirmed by the district for positivity, whereas "closed" cases are confirmed.

The statement added, "CPS was reporting all school-level open cases on our COVID-19 data website pages until Winter Break. CPS updated the data dashboard Dec. 20, 2021 to switch from all open school-level cases to only closed cases at the school level ... This change was made to provide a more accurate number of closed positive & confirmed cases & protect the privacy of our students and staff."

According to the *Sun-Times*, Ondrey did not buy this explanation that CPS was trying to protect the privacy of students and staff as the data is anonymized.

Anthony Moser, another CPS parent, requested a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request on January 12 to investigate CPS data on COVID cases from the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH). What he received was a heavily redacted report from the FOIA request.

Moser commented on Ondrey's revelations: "Whatever argument CPS wants to make about the correctness of one measurement versus another, they changed what they were reporting in a way that drastically lowers the apparent spread of COVID without telling anyone. It's fundamentally dishonest. This is the coverup."

As for the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), they have largely ignored Ondrey's discovery. Instead, the CTU has done everything in its power to facilitate the reopening of schools, including shutting down the collective action of 25,000 teachers who voted overwhelmingly to stop unsafe in-person learning in the school district after the holiday break.

Moreover, according to Ondrey, as teachers voted "temporarily [to] switch to remote because of the increase of COVID in the community, data on COVID at the school level was suppressed and not shown on school dashboards."

Cases in Cook County, including Chicago, went from 1,535 cases in the beginning of December to over 41,000 cases by January 3 as teachers and students returned to classes. On January 4, over 73 percent of teachers voted to go remote by January 5 until the surge subsided. Within a week, the CTU conspired with Lightfoot and CPS to send teachers and students back to in-person schools in an agreement that would allow for widespread infections to continue and inadequate testing.

Teachers, parents and students were incensed by the CPS-CTU agreement. Thousands of CPS students then conducted their own walkouts to oppose the unsafe school reopenings across the city.

Opposition to school reopenings and the CPS data coverup by parents and teachers continues to grow. Dawn, a CPS parent, told the WSWS, "We don't trust our high school numbers at all. And [our school] has high vaccination rates and also high cases. Our kids are home. And quarantining at the high school level is very spotty."

Another CPS parent, who wished to remain anonymous, spoke to the WSWS about the unsafe reopenings and the CPS data coverup. She said of the CPS coverup, explaining the reporting debacle in her son's school, "I believe that report [by Ondrey]. I'm a CPS parent for two kids in CPS. On the news I see CPS constantly saying they are supporting the parents'

decisions. However, I've never been asked if I want my kids in person or remote. Last semester they sent a survey to parents. Obviously, parents were highly in favor of remote education when positivity was 4 or 5 percent. Now the positivity is at 11 percent and last week it was at 22 percent. We have no say whatsoever!"

She reported that her son was in a classroom that had a positive case, but she was not informed. "I came to find out from a parent that it was my child's classroom." Despite the positive cases and exposure her son faced, the principal demanded that her child return to class or face an unexcused absence. "They're not working with us to protect our child's health," she said.

"They're instead penalizing us and forcing us to send our kids back," she added. "We all know if there's more kids back, the corporations make more money."

Parents, teachers and students are encouraged to send us reports about the cases at their schools or tell us their stories. Ending the pandemic is possible and can be done with a Zero COVID strategy. The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Committee urges rank-and-file teachers, parents and students opposed to the unsafe school reopenings to join the committee.

Fill out the form below to learn more and build the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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