

Student-led walkout in Broward County, Florida canceled after county school board threatens students

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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IY SSE) encourages high school youth to contact us today to share the conditions in your school. Get involved in the fight against unsafe school reopenings!

High school students throughout Broward County, Florida planned to walk out of their classrooms Monday morning to protest against the county school board's reckless COVID-19 policies. The students were demanding, and continue to demand, better, scientifically guided public health policies to stop transmission of the disease through the schools.

However, the students canceled the protest over the weekend after the county school board issued a series of warnings to the students and threatened them with retaliation.

Student organizers at several high schools, who created social media pages on Twitter and Instagram to protect their identities, first announced last week that they would mobilize students for mass walkouts during school hours.

Youth in Broward had become furious and fed up with the needless sacrifice of countless lives due to the callous indifference displayed by school district officials. The county school board, however, has been determined to suppress their democratic and free speech rights and send children back into unsafe classrooms after their winter break, despite the massive surge in COVID-19 infections sparked by the highly infectious Omicron variant.

A collective of students in the sixth-largest school district in the US issued an open letter through social media on January 11 to the Broward County School Board demanding officials put in place policies that would curb the spread of the pandemic. The open letter came just one week after students returned to classrooms for the spring semester, while case numbers in Broward and throughout Florida had already been soaring.

The open letter notes several incredible statistics showing the explosive growth of COVID-19 infections in Broward.

An average of 7,179 cases have been recorded each day, while the county's positivity rate remains at a staggering 37.8 percent, far exceeding the World Health Organization's threshold of 5 percent needed to demonstrate the pandemic is contained. More than 8,000 students and teachers have tested positive for the virus for the 2021-22 school year, with 40 percent of these cases occurring since winter break. Most of the remaining cases came during August and September, with schools reopening during the

height of the Delta surge.

The letter stresses that under these dire conditions it is "necessary ... to curb the spread of the pandemic now to protect our communities and ensure that a more disruptive period of online school does not happen later." The demands that the students placed were: 1) a return to virtual learning for at least two weeks to stop the transmission of COVID-19 on campus, 2) provide students and staff with N95 masks to effectively curb the spread of COVID-19 after in-person learning resumes, 3) perform weekly PCR tests on the staff population to isolate and contain outbreaks of COVID.

After learning of a planned student walkout to protest these life-threatening circumstances, the Broward School Board responded with enormous repression and intimidation in an effort to browbeat students into calling off the walkout. The board released an email on Friday denouncing the students' demand for remote learning. Giving tactical support for the reactionary policies of far-right Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, who has signed legislation making it illegal for schools to teach virtually, the email read: "Intermittent virtual learning opportunities as offered last school year are prohibited by our state."

Seeking to muzzle any opposition, the email warns students against any independent action done without the blessing of the board, declaring: "the district is not sponsoring or participating in the walkout" and "any student advocacy needs to be outside of the school day." The email concludes with an ominous threat: "Students will not be authorized to leave campus during the regular scheduled school day to participate in a walkout."

The threats were not without foundation. Several schools reported that administrators reinforced security personnel and police officers to block the school gates to effectively lock students inside the buildings. Administrators also threatened anyone who participated in the walkout with punishments similar for students who skip class or engage in other types of truancy.

The email painted an entirely false portrait of the situation inside Broward's schools. Its authors note that the district has maintained its: "commitment to provide our students and staff with a healthy learning environment." The email claims that the other two protocols—masking and COVID testing—are already being implemented and thus no further changes are needed. It touts recent changes made in their face-covering policy for guests,

which requires visitors and vendors to wear masks while inside facilities but acknowledges that masking for students and staff is optional.

The policy change does not come close to addressing the real safety concerns of students, teachers and staff. There are over 261,000 students and 21,000 teachers and staff in the Broward County district who are being crammed into overcrowded classrooms and hallways that give ample opportunity for the virus to spread. Just like the prohibition of virtual learning, the email also cites recent legislation from DeSantis that bars school districts from requiring face covering usage by students. The governor's right-wing action is in defiance of the most basic public health procedures meant to stop transmission of the virus.

The email goes on to mention that at-home test kits are provided to all employees and that free, voluntary testing is available to all students. This is meant to conceal the failure of the school district to implement systematic, rigorous testing and contact tracing that epidemiologists and public health experts say are needed for identifying outbreaks of COVID. Testing is offered on a "voluntary" basis, but nothing is said of requiring testing for students exposed to the virus.

The statistics referenced in the open letter written by Broward students dismantle the assertion made in the Broward County email that the district's: "protocols contribute to the downward trend of COVID-19 related absences for staff and students." Moreover, the explosive growth of child COVID infections has coincided with the reopening of schools for the spring and undermines the arguments made by the school board that schools are not accelerating community transmission.

From December 17 to 23, the first week of the winter break holiday, and when students were not in classrooms, the number of cases recorded for Florida's school aged children and adolescents was 17,537. But last week, January 14 to January 20, the number of weekly cases recorded for this group rose to 56,402, a staggering 321 percent increase in less than three weeks after the resumption of classroom learning.

Hospitalizations among Florida's minors positive for COVID-19 have also soared in the past month. On December 21, the number of children hospitalized with the virus was approximately 100 and by January 14 this number more than doubled to 237 children hospitalized with active cases of COVID-19. As the omicron surge was gaining steam this month, thousands of teachers were calling out sick in Miami-Dade and Broward County public schools, as new COVID-19 cases continued to skyrocket across South Florida.

On the first day back after the two-week winter holiday, 2,110 Miami-Dade instructional personnel, including counselors, and 94 bus drivers were absent. The massive staffing crisis and the inability of the district to fill teacher positions tear to shreds the assertion that in-person learning amounts to a "healthy learning environment."

The bullying tactics toward Broward students are testament to the sort of repressive methods that district figureheads, allied with the Democratic Party and backed by the teachers unions, have resorted to in their campaign to reopen the schools nationwide. A conscious decision was made to stamp out any opposition out of fear that a walkout would fuel more rebellions. Broward

Superintendent Vickie Cartwright, a Democrat, told the media: "It seems to be more of a copycat type of approach that's happening, for example, up in New York and Chicago."

Governor Ron DeSantis has garnered a notorious reputation nationally as a far-right reactionary whose administration has not only prohibited any attempt by school districts to implement virtual learning, but also forbidden even the most bare minimum mitigation measures like masking in schools.

DeSantis declared earlier this month that public schools must remain open for in-person learning, regardless of the numbers of students and teachers getting sick from COVID due to the Omicron wave, and condemned widespread fears and public concern over the variant as "fauci-ism," a political slur suggesting that infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci is a dictator. During the fall semester, he directed state education officials to take away salaries from school board members and withheld funding from local school districts, including the largest ones like Broward, that defied his ban on pandemic mask mandates in classrooms.

All of Broward County's school board members are either members of the Democratic Party or closely associated with its apparatus. The response of the Democrats and teachers unions to the fascistic Republicans in Florida, just like their counterparts nationwide, has been completely empty. While some have postured as defenders of public health and science, they have mounted no serious opposition. Both local and state Democratic figures have acquiesced to the Republicans' policies regarding the schools and the broader pandemic crisis, and have been just as supportive of the back-to-school policy.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the WSWS call on all students, teachers and educators to oppose the anti-democratic methods of the Broward County School Board. We appeal to students to join the IYSSE and the growing movement calling for the closure of schools and the immediate return to virtual learning, along with lockdowns, the closure of nonessential businesses and rigorous contact tracing and testing, to finally put an end to COVID-19 in the US and internationally.



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wsws.org/contact