

More than a quarter of Los Angeles students are out sick amid Omicron surge

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As the Los Angeles Unified School District enters the third week of the spring semester, coronavirus cases continue to explode throughout student and staff populations.

Despite the fact that a staggering 66,000 students tested positive for coronavirus as part of baseline testing conducted by the district prior to reopening, the school district decided to fully open nonetheless on January 11. Unsurprisingly, student attendance rapidly declined as case numbers skyrocketed.

The district averaged 72.5 and 75.9 percent attendance respectively last Tuesday and Wednesday or an average of 107,000 students absent each day. Absentee figures were even worse during the first week of the spring semester when the district recorded an absentee rate of 33.2 percent.

On Friday, the district announced that it would mandate non-cloth face masks beginning on Monday, January 24 to slow down accelerating cases among students and staff, a measure which will be insufficient on its own to substantially bring down infection figures. A day after the mask announcement, the Los Angeles County Department of Health reported that the seven-day test positivity rate for COVID-19 remained “very high” at 16 percent. More than 250,000 positive cases had been reported the previous week while 4,701 COVID-19 patients were hospitalized across Los Angeles County on Tuesday.

The modified mask mandate went into effect the same day California state senator Richard Pan announced legislation requiring students to be vaccinated against COVID-19 to attend in-person classes. The legislation, if passed, would add the COVID-19 vaccine to the list of inoculations students must receive to attend K-12 schools. If passed, the law would not go into effect until January 1, 2023 and is dependent on full FDA approval of vaccines for school-aged children.

The health care system in Los Angeles, the second-largest metropolitan area in the country, is on the brink of collapse from the latest surge of Omicron infections and hospitalizations.

While hospitals fill up to and beyond capacity, staffing

levels are decreasing as more nurses and doctors become infected with COVID.

Across Los Angeles County, between January 7 and 13, a total of 1,268 new positive cases were reported among health care workers, a 30 percent increase versus the prior week. Nonetheless, the California Department of Public Health order issued on January 8 still allows Covid positive health care workers to immediately return to work without isolation and further testing provided they are asymptomatic and wearing N95 masks.

As a result of the recent spike in hospitalizations, Los Angeles County Health Director Barbara Ferrer warned, “We still don’t know the longer-term consequences from Omicron infections, including the development of long COVID or MIS-C [Multi-Inflammatory Syndrome] among children. So please continue to do your part in slowing the spread of Omicron to help us keep ourselves and our loved ones healthy and out of the hospital.”

While nurses are told to come back into work after testing positive, school sites have been given the green light by both the state of California and county of Los Angeles to stop reporting cases to public health departments during the current surge of the virus. Furthermore, under the active “surge protocol,” initiated on January 12, schools are no longer required to perform contact tracing at all and are not required to inform the county about any students or staff on campus who may have been in contact with an infected individual.

Los Angeles County in fact released an updated version of its “COVID-10 Exposure Management Plan Guidance in TK-12 Schools” on January 18. The plan makes clear that the presence of a coronavirus surge is the occasion not for tightening of safety protocols at schools but for the exact opposite.

Under the new guidelines, when a confirmed positive case is found, the school’s Covid compliance officer is required to identify groups of people in contact with the infected individual rather than individual students and staff. Individuals in the groups identified are now allowed to fully

remain on campus if asymptomatic.

Such measures only ensure that cases will continue to spread and have in fact already led to unavoidable campus shutdowns.

Culver City Unified School District outside Los Angeles announced last week that it was ending in-person instruction after a spike in coronavirus cases. Rather than switch to remote learning, however, the district is planning to make up for lost instructional time with additional days at the end of the current academic year. West Contra Costa Unified School District, north of Oakland, California, had also announced two “smoke days” on Friday, January 7 and Monday, January 10, due to rising cases there. Such “smoke” days are meant to be used when nearby wildfires present a severe risk to air quality.

A great many of the current school closures across California, however, have been the result of COVID-related staffing shortages so acute that schools cannot feasibly remain open.

Other schools and districts have dealt with staffing shortages by merging classes into cafeterias and auditoriums, giving the virus more chances to spread among the student population. Students in Sacramento, San Diego and Simi Valley Unified, to give only a few examples, have sent children into gyms during staffing shortages. Students receive little to no instruction under such circumstances with schools largely being converted into day care centers due to lack of staff.

According to a *Cal Matters* article from last Wednesday, the Simi Valley Unified School District, also near Los Angeles, only had enough substitutes to cover half of the teachers who had to stay home after testing positive for COVID-19. This was even after Simi Valley nearly doubled pay rates for substitute teachers from \$110 to \$205 a day.

The state, for its part, has promised that schools will lose funding for instructional days off adding up to less than 180 days instructional time this academic year. Moreover, funding is also based on student attendance, placing immense pressures on districts and campuses to keep children in unsafe classrooms.

In spite of these developments and the staggering rates of infections at school sites, capitalist politicians from the Biden administration on down continue to falsely insist that school sites are safe. Speaking at a local elementary school last week, incoming LAUSD superintendent Alberto Carvalho said that schools were the safest place for children. “We need to convey,” he said, “that schools are the safest places in our community.” Addressing the dwindling number of teachers of staff actually able to come to campuses due to coronavirus infections, Carvalho implied that the dangers were largely in teachers’ minds. “I

recognize that there is anxiety still.” he said. “There’s also an opportunity to have honest conversations about dignifying what they [teachers] do through work conditions as been done in the past and through benefits and compensation.”

The superintendent’s last comment reflects intense nervousness that teachers may not only leave the profession but attempt to organize a coordinated fight against the homicidal school reopening policy themselves. Despite the superintendent-to-be’s claims that schools are safe, recently released reports indicate that K-12 schools accounted for about 18 percent of workplace outbreaks in 2021 and schools in fact outpaced health care facilities for COVID-19 outbreaks last autumn.

Carvalho’s remarks also coincided with the announcement by the United Teachers of Los Angeles of a new negotiation platform a few weeks in advance of contract talks with the district. The UTLA’s “Beyond Recovery Platform” will be voted on by members in February.

The title of the platform is itself a brazen acknowledgement by the union leadership they believe the pandemic to be all but over and of no concern. As in its preparations for the last 2019 contract, the UTLA is dangling the possibility of higher salaries and smaller class sizes to keep teachers on the job only to later “realize” these demands through various “committees” for smaller class and better wages, none of which will have any actual mandate to do anything about either.

In fact, the UTLA played a crucial role in school reopenings last year, providing members with no options whatsoever to keep remote learning in place to protect the health and lives of themselves, their students and their communities.

Keeping schools safe and working towards the elimination of the coronavirus pandemic requires the active intervention of the working class on an independent socialist program. The West Coast Educators Rank and File Safety Committees are working to build networks of teachers, students and workers in opposition to the homicidal pandemic policies of state and local governments in collaboration with the school districts and teachers unions. Find out more about joining the West Coast Educators Rank and File Safety Committees.



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