

# “Our kids are pawns”—Parents, teachers outraged Chicago Public Schools kept open during snowstorm

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Chicago Public Schools (CPS) remained open Wednesday and Thursday in spite of a snowstorm which had prompted Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker to declare a state of emergency. That buildings would remain open was announced by the district at the very last minute Wednesday morning.

In neighborhoods across the city, streets were treacherous and had not been cleared of snow. School lots and drop-off paths were also not accessible. Many families kept their children home and reported receiving robocalls from the district reminding them that “attendance is important.”

The refusal to close schools comes after the city’s Democratic administration under Mayor Lori Lightfoot forced through the reopening of in-person learning in spite of mass coronavirus infections. CPS teachers carried out a remote work action after more than 70 percent voted to stop in-person instruction, a move that was viciously attacked by Lightfoot and CPS CEO Pedro Martinez. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) subverted the teachers’ commitment to safe learning conditions, ramming through a widely hated agreement with no meaningful safety guarantees, allowing the schools to reopen.

A parent of students at Inter-American Elementary Magnet School told the WSW, “There was no way we were going in there yesterday or today. But I don’t understand why they still won’t do online learning. It was working well last year. I am very disappointed this is still going on. CPS doesn’t listen to us.”

A district representative told the local CBS affiliate station that there is not currently any e-learning plan being developed, “but it is being explored.”

A southside parent told the WSW, “Plows passed

[by] twice yesterday and twice today. My daughter’s school Gwendolyn Brooks didn’t have enough teachers, so they stuck all the kids in the auditorium. Luckily, I didn’t send my children to school yesterday or today. Ridiculous that CPS would rather put children in danger commuting to school instead of [offering] e-learning like all the surrounding municipalities did. Our kids are pawns now.”

She commented on the differences between working class neighborhoods and the more affluent areas. “If you really wanna see the difference, go through downtown and compare those sidewalks to the sidewalks in Englewood,” a very impoverished neighborhood, “from 55th to 79th and Halsted. People in Englewood have to walk in the streets.”

She shared a photo of the conditions, adding, “On top of that photo, there are multiple people that have to walk in the streets due to abandoned properties whose sidewalks aren’t shoveled.”

One teacher said that the district’s decision was political, retaliation for the teachers’ fight against the reopening of school buildings which create centers of community spread of COVID-19. “They are punishing us for the work stoppage. We had 30 percent student attendance yesterday, but teachers were there. AND our parking lot was plowed by what must have been a four-foot clown in a car full of rabid squirrels. We are up to 67 percent student attendance today.”

She also took note of the shambolic COVID-19 testing at her school. “So the people that are supposed to come and test us weekly have been to our school once in the month of January. We were promised weekly tests, and they continue to not come to our school so. ... They randomly came one day when there

were no children in the building and with no warning for a random hour when we all had meetings.

“I haven’t received PPE since the first and it was barely enough to keep afloat until the third quarter. Nothing for the students until the work stoppage. Now we have a ton of cloth masks for the little ones. We are told cloth masks aren’t effective, so they just sit there. I have received at most 100 masks total for myself and my students for about 70 days of school.”

Asked if teachers, staff and students were given high-quality N95 masks, she replied, “No, they have not. I mean, there have been a few thrown our way and our kids’ way, if needed, but they are too big for the little ones. In regard to N95s, maybe 25?”

She added, “The promise of testing is also ridiculous. And do you know that they are asking volunteers within the school to do contact tracing as a non-paid tireless job? That is the only way contact tracing will now happen.

“Besides saving lives during the surge, what the hell was the work stoppage actually for? A lot of really poor and really passionate people lost a lot of good pay because of it, and the union, who did not lose pay, did nothing.”

On January 26, school officials alerted families on Facebook that Corkery Elementary in the Little Village neighborhood would open despite having no heat, electricity or phone service after a transformer failed in the neighborhood. The temperatures that day were in the single digits Fahrenheit with negative wind chill. School staff were outside speaking with families during drop-off about the situation. CPS reportedly served breakfast and had students in class by 8:00 a.m. Power was not restored until 9:35 a.m.

Parents were outraged that there was even a question about opening the school buildings. “What I don’t understand is why in the world this building is open to anyone? It’s not even safe for staff, let alone children. No one should even have to make this choice,” one mom wrote.



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