

Dozens of US colleges and universities end efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19

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22 February 2022

As the ruling class declares the COVID-19 pandemic “endemic” and demands that workers and youth learn to “live with the virus,” colleges and universities across the US have begun lifting even minimal mitigation measures to slow the spread of the virus.

The overall strategy being adopted by the Democratic Party finds sharp expression in California Governor Gavin Newsom’s “SMARTER” plan, which calls for the ending of public health measures, such as contact tracing, mask mandates and even daily case counts. Newsom recently declared at a press conference that society must “move on” from the “crisis mentality,” regardless of the number of deaths or infections. He added, “there is no finish line” to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This follows announcements by other Democratic-led states on the East Coast ending mask mandates and other mitigation measures.

In California, University of California Berkeley resumed in-person instruction in late January. The administration has also announced that it will end its mask mandate on February 28. The broader Bay Area has already lifted the indoor mask mandate.

Democratic governors in Oregon and Washington state recently announced an end to indoor mask mandates beginning mid to late March. Oregon officials announced that the statewide mask mandate will be lifted on March 31 or earlier, whenever hospitalizations fall below 400 total across the state.

Universities across Oregon have stated that they will keep mask mandates in place until further notice. Portland State University has not made a decision to lift its mask mandate, but given the push by the Democratic Party to end mitigation measures, both universities said they would revisit this decision in March.

Washington State University ended mandatory masking at large outdoor events beginning February 18, while keeping the indoor mask and vaccine mandates. University of Washington resumed fully in-person learning on January 31.

Massachusetts will be lifting its masking requirements for

K-12 schools statewide on February 28. “With Massachusetts a national leader in vaccinating kids, combined with our robust testing programs, it is time to lift the mask mandate in schools and give students and staff a sense of normalcy after dealing with enormous challenges over the past two years,” said Governor Charlie Baker.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge is also further relaxing restrictions. On February 14 seating in dining halls returned to full capacity, and fully vaccinated staff and presenters were allowed to remove their masks during events and classes, while still requiring students to keep their masks on indoors, per the City of Cambridge policy. MIT has also reduced the testing requirement for students to once per week, as opposed to twice a week.

Harvard is currently required by the city to keep its mask mandate in place; however, the university has ended almost every other mitigation policy. The school announced in early January that there will be “no more contact tracing in high volume.” Rather “individuals who test positive should identify and notify their close contacts.”

The university has been prompted to make these radical changes—which have the potential of driving up COVID-19 cases, sickness and death among students, staff and the wider community—“in accordance with recommendations from public health experts and guidance from state and federal public health experts and guidance from state and federal public health agencies,” according to the *Harvard Crimson*.

These sweeping rule changes are directly influenced by the recent guideline changes coming from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In line with this guidance, Harvard will no longer require students who test positive to move into university-provided isolation housing but will instead ask students to isolate in their dorms for five days.

In Illinois, mask mandates will be dropped throughout the state starting on March 1. Most colleges and universities across the state have not yet indicated if their current

guidance will change. For now, fully opened classes and all other activities are in-person but with masks required. After March 1, it will be up to the individual school districts to enforce mask mandates.

Within the city of Chicago, masking indoors is followed in most schools and workplaces. The agreement between the city and the Chicago Teachers Union states that masks will be required in some Chicago Public Schools at least until the end of the year.

University of Michigan will keep the mask mandate in place, while still doing in-person instruction. K-12 schools in Michigan, however, will drop requirements on masking and quarantining starting February 28. Albion College in central Michigan has ended restrictions on in-person events and dining in the school cafeteria.

Most Texas colleges and universities resumed in-person classes after a few weeks of virtual instruction on January 18. Since then, tens of thousands of university students have been infected with SARS-CoV-2.

Texas A&M University, which has 64,054 students and 10,160 faculty and staff, has recorded 4,603 cases since the start of the semester as part of weekly COVID-19 testing. During a five-week period starting the week ending January 8, over 1 percent of the student body and staff were infected per week. While the number of weekly cases has dropped somewhat, the positivity rate was alarmingly high, consistently staying above 22 percent since January 8 except for the week ending February 12.

Texas A&M, like most Texas universities, has no masking policy or vaccine requirement. The school also changed its isolation and quarantine guidance on January 9 from 10 days quarantine to 5 days.

One Texas A&M law student, Brittany Reed, revealed in a TikTok video that she was told virtual “simply wasn’t an option” by the administration. Reed had requested a virtual option because she was experiencing a lupus flare-up and had COVID-19. According to her TikTok video, the administration told her to simply “sit in the back of the classroom or near a wall” so that she was not surrounded by as many people.

On the “abovethelaw” blog an unnamed law student revealed that Texas A&M forbids virtual learning without exception. Professors are not being given any option other than virtual classes. No exceptions exist in the attendance policy for students quarantined due to COVID-19, forcing sick students to choose between being withdrawn from their classes or to go in sick. Unlike last semester when Texas A&M required twice-weekly testing, no such requirement exists now. The student explained, “There were administrative concerns that if everyone was required to be tested, too many people would be forced to quarantine.”

Members of the University of Texas at Austin Student Government, UT senate, and other student organizations shared a petition on February 8 stating that UT “continues to risk the safety and well-being of students, faculty, and staff by resuming in-person classes and campus operations” calling the decision to resume full in-person learning “reckless at best and life-threatening at worst.” The petition calls on UT to allow professors “the discretion to enact a hybrid model of learning.”

The petition correctly notes that “while the Omicron variant is often perceived as a ‘mild’ threat for everyone, that is simply untrue.” It calls for the return to safety measures the university previously had employed, such as requiring masking indoors, social distancing and notifications of infections in classes. UT stopped the latter policy in September 2021. The petition also calls for a remote option for all classes and the removal of attendance policies, which require students to go into infected classrooms.

Virginia public universities, including the University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, Virginia Commonwealth University and George Mason University, rescinded their COVID-19 vaccine mandates earlier this month. This move was followed by the new Republican administration in the state signing a new bill banning mask mandates across the state.

The aim of these bipartisan policies on school campuses is mass infection. The drive to end all mitigation measures and normalize mass infection and death in perpetuity is being pursued by both Democratic and Republican politicians alike. The protection of the population from a deadly disease comes up against the profit interests of the ruling class, which demands workers go back to the workplace and students return to unsafe classrooms.

We urge all youth and students to contact the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) to share the conditions in your school and get involved in the fight against the pandemic.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact