

# Mask mandates end in nearly every US school district as pediatric death toll climbs

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As the more infectious BA.2 Omicron subvariant ignites a new surge of COVID-19 infections around the world, the entire United States political establishment has committed to the lifting of basic mitigation measures that have been in place for much of the last two years.

This shift in policy has led to the dropping of mask requirements in nearly every school district across the country, even as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recorded the loss of 616 children to the virus since the start of 2022.

The last three states, except for Hawaii, with mask requirements in schools allowed them to expire on March 12, following a joint statement by their three Democratic governors last week. Hawaii's mask mandate for schools is now set to expire two weeks later, on March 26.

Some 7.5 million school children in the three states along the Pacific Coast went to school Monday without any masking requirement, although those living in Los Angeles and San Diego counties were still under local mandates due to higher community infection rates. California has also dropped its requirement for unvaccinated people to wear masks in public indoor locations.

Just two months ago, during the mountainous peak of 1 million daily Omicron-fueled infections, nine states maintained statewide indoor mask mandates for the general public, and 16 states required universal masking in schools that applied to about half of the 53 million children in the country. This list included California, New York, Illinois, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington and other Democratic Party-led states.

New York, New Jersey and most New England states abandoned mask mandates by last Monday, March 7. All other Democratic-controlled states have now done so except Hawaii.

Republican-controlled states dropped mask mandates months ago, if they even had them. Many of these states have enacted bans on mask mandates by local school districts, following the examples of Florida and Texas. The Arizona state legislature was considering such legislation this week, after the Tucson school district continued its mandate due to the rate of infection in the city.

In many of these areas, political and health officials have previously followed a set of insufficient but important mitigation measures to slow down transmission rates, while accepting widespread infection in order to keep workers on the job and kids in classrooms.

Now every state and district is in the process of tossing out the most basic public health measures, given the green light by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) updating its risk assessment metrics based on hospital ICU capacity and raising the definition of “low” risk settings to anything below an average of 200 daily cases per 100,000 people. This alteration of standards shifted 70 percent of the US population from a substantial or high risk setting to low risk, leading to the dropping of indoor mask recommendations for these areas.

Local and state officials have proclaimed the beginning of the “endemic” phase where the population must learn to “live with” the virus, sweeping the reality of the pandemic under the rug as the corporate media focused attention on war propaganda against Russia and virtually ended reporting on COVID-19 data.

These claims are not founded on epidemiological science, in which the term endemic generally describes a disease that is localized to a region and has predictable case patterns. Nor do the policies abide by the principles of public health, which hold at their core the protection of the population and especially those most vulnerable.

Rather, the Democratic Party has fully signed on to the blatant “herd immunity” policies that the Republican Party, far-right groups and Donald Trump have been advocating since the beginning of the pandemic.

After most states across the Northeast and West Coast ended statewide indoor mask requirements by the end of last week, Hawaii will be the final state to end its mandate by March 26. The term “mask optional” is being used to encourage an individualist attitude toward COVID-19 safety, as if one can protect themselves on their own without a proven public health program like China's Zero Covid elimination strategy.

Furthermore, these policies are lifting mask requirements while at the same time scaling back data reporting, contact tracing and requirements to quarantine if exposed to someone with COVID-19. The entire population will be left without the tools and knowledge required to protect themselves and their loved ones, thrown into the fires and told to accept whatever consequences may come.

New York City, the largest city in the country with over 1 million school children, announced a “mask optional” policy for all those aged six years and older starting March 7. The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) supported the decision saying that it was “the right time to safely move to an optional mask system as

long as all testing remains in place,” even as BA.2 cases are increasingly supplanting BA.1 cases in the city and a growing number of children are falling ill from the virus. Six children have died from COVID-19 in the city in 2022 alone.

Tom, a high-school teacher in Manhattan, reported that since the mask mandate was lifted for public schools, roughly one-third of staff and administrators are no longer wearing them, with nearly all students continuing them. “There are high absences but hard to know why,” Tom continued, “We have one confirmed case this week, but with less testing it’s hard to know why kids are out. School administrators definitely are no longer keeping us informed about cases.”

Linda, a parent in the Bronx, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “All I know is this pandemic is not over at all. If that’s the case, three kids wouldn’t have died in the first place. I truly believe that my kids and everybody else’s kids and all the peoples’ lives are worth it, but instead they [the government] wanna lie to us. I strongly feel that schools should be shut down because they’re lying to all of us.” Linda has three children and a grandson, adding “I wanna be here to see them grow up and someday get married.”

She continued by saying that the media coverage of Ukraine is designed “to distract us from what’s really happening right now. If we are the ones keeping this world afloat then why lie, cheat and steal from us, or want to kill our children?”

Mayor Lori Lightfoot unilaterally changed the protocol in Chicago Public Schools, bypassing the contract negotiated by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and voted on by its members earlier this year, in order to make masks optional for all students beginning this week.

Similar last-minute and unilateral decisions to go “mask optional” were made in the cities of Seattle and Portland, as well as the US territory Puerto Rico, with the new policies starting March 14. A group of two dozen high school students protested the change outside the district headquarters in Portland on Friday, and tens of thousands of Puerto Rican teachers joined public employees in a mass strike last month against austerity and poor conditions.

Rather than mobilizing educators in an active struggle against the districts’ imposition of requirements that violate previous contracts, the unions have pursued only legal arguments. The CTU filed an unfair labor practice lawsuit on Monday, a move which will likely be rejected by the courts and is ultimately designed to suppress strike action and protests by teachers. In Seattle and Portland, the teacher unions have argued that nothing can be done since previous agreements state the school safety measures will follow state and county health department guidance for K-12 schools.

Washington DC’s public school district will begin “mask optional” guidelines starting on Wednesday, with many of the district’s charter schools soon to follow suit. The city’s health department also recommends the end to most contact tracing, and they will use an “honor system” to encourage only those who are not vaccinated to stay home if they are exposed to a positive case. Only 25 percent of the 5- to 11-year-old children in the district are fully vaccinated, according to a recent *Washington Post* article.

The Washington Teachers’ Union has publicly supported lifting

the mask mandate, with its President Jacqueline Pogue Lyons stating that it’s a good thing so long as the district will reinstate the requirement if case numbers rise, not providing any sort of metric to determine what constitutes concerning levels of transmission. The DC COVID-19 dashboard has not been updated since February 27, at which the 7-day average case rate was 55.5 per 100,000 residents, which constituted a substantial transmission level under previous CDC metrics.

In one of the wealthiest cities in the country, health officials in Boston, Massachusetts will keep school mask mandates in place until the daily case count falls to 10 per 100,000. The current data shows a seven-day per capita average of 13.

The efforts to get workers back on the job, raise productivity to ensure higher profit margins and increase economic activity requires the lifting of any safety protocols which may have reduced attendance or slowed down production. It is also dependent on generating within the population dangerous delusions that the pandemic will be here for years to come, so when cases drop from prior waves of infection, it is safe to lift restrictions until the next variant-fueled surge arrives. Such a policy means accepting mass infection and death of the human population for years on end, including both children and adult survivors suffering from Long COVID.

Perhaps more importantly, the American ruling class desperately seeks to suppress mass working-class opposition to its handling of the pandemic and increasingly dire social conditions through the methods of make-believe fantasies about COVID-19 and the relentless media hysteria around the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The disorienting impact of the policies will be short lived, as the impact of the looming BA.2 wave, runaway inflation and the reckless US-NATO path to world war fuels the class struggle.

Teachers, parents and students who understand the dangers of both the pandemic and war have the critical task of building independent rank-and-file committees in every school district, building towards a mass international movement of the working class that can successfully challenge the entire capitalist social system that has subordinated life to profit.



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