

West Coast schools remove mask mandates as US child deaths from COVID-19 continue to mount

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With the announcement of an agreement last Friday to end mandatory masking in Los Angeles schools, virtually every school across the US West Coast has now made masks optional on campuses as COVID-19 deaths continue to mount among school-aged children.

These new directives arrive as evidence makes clear that mask optional policies lead to escalating incidences of coronavirus infections at both schools and workplaces. One such study conducted by Duke University, and which was published on March 9 in the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, found that mask-mandatory schools had 72 percent less within-school spread than their mask-optional counterparts. The study was conducted using 61 school districts across nine states and involved more than 1.1 million students and 150,000 staff members.

Another study recently conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Arkansas found that schools there had a 23 percent lower incidence rate of coronavirus infections in fully masked schools versus those that were not.

According to the Burbio website, which tracks school reopenings and mask mandates, however, only 31 percent of the country's largest 500 school districts now require masks compared to 60 percent just one month ago. On a statewide level, Hawaii is the only state remaining in the country to require masks in all schools.

In the United States alone there have been 1,656 pediatric deaths from COVID-19 as of March 12, with 616, or 37 percent of the total, occurring since the start of 2022. Not only have pediatric deaths continually increased but the death rate itself has been accelerating. This is due to the full reopening of schools for in-person learning last year along with the recent lifting of mask mandates and other mitigation measures on campuses.

The January 2022 pediatric death rate stood at 5.7 per day followed by 7.5 per day in February and 18.8 per day thus far in the month of March.

These numbers are poised to increase as the BA.2 subvariant of Omicron continues to spread across the US.

According to the CDC, infections of BA.2 have doubled each week for the past month and thus far has primarily been concentrated in the Northeast and the West Coast. In the week ending March 5, 14.2 percent of positive coronavirus cases were due to BA.2; in the week ending March 12, that number increased to 23.1 percent.

Under conditions of an ever-escalating public health catastrophe, the rational response would be the implementation of aggressive and consistent measures—including lockdowns and the closure of schools and nonessential businesses—to contain the spread and eliminate COVID-19. The fact that masking, the last remaining public health measure in the US to try and slow the spread of COVID-19, is being completely abandoned, speaks to the utter contempt the US ruling class has for workers and their children.

The Los Angeles teachers union, the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) has gained an undeserved reputation as a defender of public health, as the district was among the last of the nation's largest school districts to keep mask mandates in place.

However, the UTLA has long since abandoned any measures to stop the spread of COVID, agreeing to reopen schools while the Delta variant surged last year. While the lifting of school mask mandates occurred several weeks after the state of California and Los Angeles County dropped mask mandates in indoor spaces, the district had already dropped mandates in outdoor school areas. Furthermore, far from opposing the lifting of mandates as a basic public health measure, the UTLA

simply retreated behind contract legality while working with the district to remove the mandates.

Similar actions were taken by teachers unions throughout the West Coast, including in the large districts of Oakland, San Diego, Portland and Seattle.

In the San Diego Unified School District, the second largest in the state of California, mask mandates are to be lifted on April 4 after students return from spring break. The initial announcement, however, was made on March 4, just three days after California Governor Gavin Newsom announced that mandates would be lifted throughout the state. The San Diego Educators Association, for its part, cynically claimed that the measure enjoyed widespread support among teachers. It claimed that the vote teachers had taken the previous July to put mask mandates in effect was not motivated by a desire to keep students and staff safe but instead to follow state public health directives regardless of efficacy. To make matters worse, on March 7 the district stopped sending out notification letters to parents after a student tests positive for COVID-19.

Speaking on the ending of the mask mandate, one San Diego parent wrote on Facebook, “Having it go away after spring break is ridiculous. After everyone’s out on vacation and gathering for a week, let’s bring them back with no masks. Sigh!”

In Oakland, California the Oakland Education Association announced the dropping of outdoor mask mandates with the expectation that indoor mask mandates will be dropped altogether on April 15. The move comes after a student strike in late January protesting inadequate protections on school sites. The student strike was quickly shut down by the Oakland Education Association which reached an agreement with the district that only included voluntary testing and masking. Now, the union is working to abandon even these limited measures as soon as possible.

None of the moves to abandon mask requirements enjoys widespread support among teachers, students or parents. In Los Angeles, to cite only one example, a poll taken by the UTLA found that nearly 60 percent of members opposed abandoning the mask mandate. Among LA voters as a whole, 68 percent approved of mandatory vaccines in school while 71 percent approved of mask requirements according to a February poll conducted by the University of California Berkeley and the *Los Angeles Times*.

In Seattle, Washington, students walked out of class on Monday to protest the ending of mask mandates after the

district put the measure in place last week. “Every time we try to get hasty and toss our masks off, we have another spike and another thousand people die,” said Eridon Stewart, a senior at Nova High School to the *Seattle Times* .

The Seattle mask mandate was lifted on March 14. Previously, the Seattle Education Association had promised to keep the mandate until May to “bring a sense of normalcy” but nonetheless caved to the district’s demands two months earlier.

Portland Public Schools in Portland, Oregon, with nearly 50,000 students, also had announced that mask mandates would be lifted on March 14.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a student at a charter high school in Oakland, California about the lifting of mask mandates on her campus.

“Some [students] are happy about that, but a lot of other students are saying this isn’t safe. We shouldn’t even be here,” the student said. “Some are asking if we can at least wear masks until the end of the school year. There is only a month and a half left in the school year.”

The school has also capitulated on its vaccine mandate, the student explained, “They also pushed back the vaccine requirement to August. It was initially going to be required by early February. There will probably be unvaccinated, unmasked people at school when the mask mandate lifts. Without the mandate, there will probably be students who get pressured to take their masks off even if they don’t want to.

“There’s one class we were in where almost everyone agreed [about keeping the mask mandate]. There is some talk about organizing something. This requires collective action. People are still getting COVID. People are still dying.”



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