

Latest COVID wave exacerbates dire conditions in New York City K-12 schools

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Last week, New York City's Health Department raised the COVID alert level to "high" in response to a rapid increase in the spread of the highly infectious and immune-resistant Omicron subvariants. Earlier this month, the city's warning level went from "low," to "medium," with the surge led by the boroughs of Manhattan and Staten Island.

In February, the city's infection warning system protocol was dramatically altered, requiring a higher threshold of community transmission, as well as increases in hospitalization, to trigger more severe levels of alert. The metrics now represent what would have, in previous months, been a significantly higher risk to public health.

Additionally, the widespread promotion of at-home testing, whose results are often not recorded in county, regional, state and national infection totals, means that the current transmission figures are likely severe undercounts.

As of Saturday, the citywide infection rate was 342 per 100,000 residents, and hospitalizations were 70 per 100,000 residents. In the latter category, levels are about 25 percent of what they were during the height of the harrowing Omicron surge earlier this year. The Omicron wave of infection triggered protests, and walkouts by New York City students.

Scientists have cited the prevalence of a new variant, BA.2.12.1, as accounting for nearly 80 percent of new infections in the city.

New York City K-12 schools have seen a near-twofold increase in infections recently, with more than 10,000 cases last week. The numbers of school cases have climbed to nearly as high as they were during the peak of the Omicron surge. This is under conditions in which an already inadequate school testing regimen has drastically undercounted the actual figures. Since the beginning of the pandemic, 37 children in New York City between the ages of 0-17 have died due to COVID.

The administration of Democratic Mayor Eric Adams

has responded to the current surge by attempting to numb the population to the virus's impact to keep businesses open and profits to Wall Street flowing. Continuing the policies of former mayor Bill de Blasio, Adams has acted in concert with the Biden administration to promote every lie, distortion and manipulation surrounding the pandemic to quell public concern and resistance. It has fought to keep schools open no matter the cost to human life and safety.

Last week, Adams responded to the recent surge in infections by following state health agencies in issuing nothing more than a "recommendation" to wear masks indoors. The administration has focused its pandemic strategy on the widespread promotion of take-home tests and antivirals. A *New York Times* article from Thursday described its approach as "[mirroring] the tone of other leaders like Gov. Kathy Hochul and President Biden who are eager to move past the pandemic and to focus on economic recovery."

In the mayor's nearly six months in office, he has consistently undermined the already limited mitigation measures put in place throughout the city to control the spread of the virus. This has included the ending of mask mandates in schools as well as the termination of vaccination mandates for indoor venues, including bars and restaurants. Only due to significant popular pushback did Adams retreat in his effort to end masking requirements for pre-K-aged children.

"I'm proud of what we are doing and how we are not allowing COVID to outsmart us. We're staying prepared and not panicking," Adams said in a media briefing last Wednesday. Completely falsifying the current situation, he added, "When I look at the hospitalizations and deaths, the numbers are stable." He continued by denouncing safety-related lockdowns. "It appears as though there's a new norm that is settling in our city and our country. Variants are going to come. With every variant that

comes, we move into shutdown thoughts. We move through panicking. We're not going to function as a city."

The political and media establishments, both national and local, have endlessly parroted several major lies in the service of forcing the working class back into unsafe jobs and schools: Firstly, that of COVID's "endemicity"; secondly, that of the supposed lessened "severity" of new variants; thirdly, that of vaccines being a panacea for COVID illness and transmission; finally, that of the impossibility of proving hospitalizations and deaths to be a direct result of, as opposed to occurring concurrently with, coronavirus infection.

The pandemic school policies of the de Blasio and Adams administrations have been a complete disaster. Effective assessment, containment and treatment of the disease in a school system of over a million students are completely absent. The policies of the New York Democrats have done nothing but place the responsibility of stopping the pandemic onto the individual, rather than society.

The devastating consequences of the coronavirus in classrooms extend far beyond their immediate medical effects. The extreme pressures put on students and educators to resume learning "as normal" after the shutdowns of 2020 and 2021 have made widespread staff shortages a routine feature of daily life in schools. Additionally, academic and behavioral problems abound among students who have been traumatized by an environment in which illness and the loss of life are not only tolerated but are now normalized as regular features of social life.

The extreme duress that educators, staff and families are put under, has, as with all the previous surges of the virus, created contempt for and anger at the establishment parties and politicians.

A New York City elementary teacher on Twitter denounced Mayor Adams for his criminal policies. "This week 10,707 students and staff in @NYCSchools tested positive for Covid and you [h]ave done NOTHING To slow the spread! You actually refused to reinstate a mask mandate until surge is over - so you are culpable in all this. [Dollars] before [kids]."

A Manhattan schoolteacher, who preferred to speak anonymously, gave an account to the WSWS of conditions at his school. "Cases are exploding at my work right now, but it's all kind of hush-hush, and very shady. If a student shows a positive test, a notice will go out to the families of a few close contacts with very little additional information, asking, but not requiring, them to

take a test. The primary concern of the administration isn't to prevent illness, it's to prevent fallout and panic while the virus kind of goes unchecked ..."

He continued: "the students sense that there's something very wrong. There's an intense mood of anger and resistance brewing among them... Perhaps rightfully so! The other day I watched an anxious 6th grader in the cafeteria ask a teacher to promise that he was safe from getting COVID. She looked him dead in the eyes and told him that she would not promise that, and simply reiterated that that we're 'living with the virus now.' Can you believe it? These kids are being told that they have to accept the risk of getting sick every day while they routinely watch their friends and caretakers struggle with this potentially deadly disease.

"If we, as the responsible adults, are sending the message to our students that the guarantee of lives and safety doesn't matter, is it really any surprise that they're now simply refusing to listen to the grown-ups? That's exactly why in many ways, being an educator right now is a logistically impossible task ..."

Teachers, school staff students, and parents must take independent political and industrial action to stop the spread of the disease. The Democratic Party and the trade unions have demonstrated their position on the pandemic for the last 26 months: let it spread, sicken, kill and disable children and adults alike.

We urge New York City parents, educators and students to join and build the Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, as part of the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to not only stop the spread of the COVID-19, but also to halt the lurch toward World War III by the Biden Administration and the destruction of working class living standards through inflation.



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