At least 1 in 12 Chicago Public Schools students caught COVID-19 during past school year

Alexander Fangmann
22 June 2022

With the school year now concluded, official Chicago Public Schools (CPS) numbers indicate at least 1 in 12 students caught COVID-19 during the 2021-2022 school year. These figures, staggering as they are, no doubt severely understate the real rate of infection among CPS students, teachers and other school workers, to say nothing of their contribution to disease spread, hospitalizations and deaths in the wider community.

This outcome is an indictment of the ruling class's mass infection policy and the role of the unions, above all the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), and its pseudo-left CORE("Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators") leadership in enforcing the unsafe reopening of schools during the pandemic.

According to the official CPS tracker, 22,568 students reported infections between August 29, 2021 and June 15, 2022, out of 272,000 students enrolled at regular district schools. This figure does not include infections among the 58,000 students enrolled at charter, contract or alternative learning schools. Nor does it include infection numbers for CPS workers or other adults, of which there were 9,477 officially reported.

Cases of COVID-19 among educators and students at CPS exploded toward the end of the school year following the abandonment of any pretense at mitigating spread, such as mandatory masking, in schools or the broader society. The last full week of the school year saw 901 students infected along with 469 adults. This is almost twice the number of students who were officially infected in the entire period from March 20, 2020, to August 28, 2021.

The week which ended May 14 recorded 730 cases among adults and 1,946 among students, with the latter number higher than any other week during the entire pandemic, including during the January Omicron surge. Although officially numbers for the following weeks dropped slightly, it is a near certainty the number of cases among students and CPS workers is much higher than what was officially recorded. As a result of the constant stream of lies proclaiming the pandemic over and the decreased emphasis on testing and tracking, many cases, especially asymptomatic ones, are being ignored even though community spread continues to be high.

Beyond CPS, Chicago is now seeing 222 new official cases per day and a near doubling of the positivity rate to 10.8 percent since last week.

There is no doubt CPS is continuing their aggressive behind-the-scenes effort to suppress and cover up the numbers as much as possible. Additionally, CPS has refused to report deaths among either students or educators, such as Jonl Bush, a special education classroom assistant, who died last November. CPS' contact tracing has been purposely inadequate, and officials have refused to track how schools have contributed to hospitalizations and deaths among family members or the broader community, even though Chicago has seen a cumulative 43,206 hospitalizations and 7,728 deaths from COVID-19.

An untold number of students, their families, and school workers are also now grappling with debilitating symptoms of Long COVID and are at greater risk of heart attacks and other cardiovascular events due to their infections. Studies have found that 30 percent or more of infections are followed by Long COVID syndrome, including among children.

The January remote work job action by Chicago educators

The horrific toll of COVID in CPS just within the last school year is a damning indictment of the catastrophic and profit-driven policies pursued by the Biden administration and the Democratic Party, with the support of the teacher unions.

The White House responded to the emergence of the Omicron variant last fall by abandoning even the inadequate "mitigation" strategy and adopting the deadly "herd immunity" policies of the previous Trump administration.

But this attempt to enforce a surrender to the virus at the most dangerous point in the pandemic to date met with the determined resistance of teachers and school workers. On January 4, following winter break, Chicago educators voted overwhelmingly to force a return to remote instruction, as infections skyrocketed amid the Omicron surge. Teachers and students all around the country, as well as internationally, were inspired by the defiant stand of educators in Chicago. The initiative taken by Chicago teachers threatened to trigger similar actions by educators throughout the US, given the widespread concerns over the unprecedented dangers posed by the Omicron variant.

The Democrats, with Chicago's Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot in the lead, thus responded ferociously, slandering teachers and locking them out of their online accounts.

The Democratic Party, and the political establishment more broadly, viewed the suppression of the Chicago educators struggle as a vital imperative. The reopening of schools was central to the strategy pursued by Biden, which was aimed at getting parents back to work and producing profits for the corporations and the financial aristocracy.

Notwithstanding its occasional radical posturing, critical assistance was provided by the CTU and the national teacher unions, which are all deeply integrated into the Democratic Party. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), to which the CTU is affiliated, is a member of the Democratic National Committee and has operated as a de facto cabinet member in the Biden administration, falsely promoting in-person learning during the pandemic as safe.

The CTU was able to overcome opposition among teachers only on the

© World Socialist Web Site

basis of lies promoting illusions in the worthless promises of the city's safety agreement, as well as providing educators virtually no time to study and discuss the deal. Even still, they were barely able to get the agreement passed, with a 45 percent "no" vote and high abstention. Opposition continued even after the agreement's supposed ratification, with high school and middle school students in Chicago walking out of schools days later to protest the lack of protections from COVID.

The only organized expression of the opposition to the CTU's sellout agreement came from the WSWS and the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. In its statement on January 11— Vote "No" on the CTU-CPS deal to reopen infected schools and spread COVID-19! Educators must launch a walkout now to save lives!—the rank-and-file committee called for a rejection of the deal and the expansion of the struggle throughout the working class in Chicago.

The committee warned, "Chicago teachers are being asked to vote on a death warrant. The move by the leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union to reopen schools to in-person learning will mean the sickness and death of teachers, parents, students and community members." It continued, "The terms reached with CPS are wholly unscientific and predicated on accepting mass infections among students and staff."

Tragically, the warnings of the committee have been confirmed via the needless infection of thousands of students and teachers.

But the educators rank-and-file committee insisted that an alternative to the unchecked spread of the virus was both possible and necessary, writing:

> It is a matter of scientific fact that the closure of schools is a vital tool in stopping the transmission of this deadly virus. This must be combined with a fight to close all nonessential businesses, compensate workers and small business owners for lost income, and implement a full program of public health measures, including universal testing, contact tracing, quarantining, and global vaccinations, to end the spread of the virus and eliminate it once and for all.

The struggles ahead

As a result of the criminally reckless reopening of schools, many families have chosen to delay enrolling their young children or decided to home school them.

CPS enrollment has fallen from around 355,000 in 2019 to around 330,000 this past school year, far outpacing the expected decline. Homeschool registrations have also increased about 200 percent, but Illinois is one of just 11 states that do not require registration, meaning the number is likely much higher. Across the state, Pre-K and Kindergarten enrollment have declined 17 percent and 8 percent, respectively, compared to an overall fall in enrollment of 3.6 percent, as parents avoid exposing their young children to a deadly and disabling pathogen.

Sensing the opposition among teachers and parents to the abandonment of any safety protocols, no matter how poorly implemented they were in practice, the district has attempted to maintain a pretense of keeping up some measures in the fall.

However, a city budget document for the upcoming year notes only that the district will "implement the health and safety protocols that are recommended by our public health partners," which "may include continued in-school testing, expansions of our test-to-stay program, robust contact tracing, ongoing vaccination events throughout the district, and other COVID-19 mitigation efforts as necessary to respond to this unpredictable global health crisis."

In other words, even CPS' inadequate testing and contact tracing systems will be on the chopping block and eliminated when city officials decide it to be politically expedient. Given the lack of any systematic and concerted public health education campaign, vaccination rates have remained anemic for some time, especially among children, with only 47.2 percent of those aged 5 to 11 having received a two shot vaccination series and only 2.9 percent having received a booster.

After shutting down the attempt by teachers in January to fight against the unsafe reopening of schools CTU has not lifted a finger in response to the district's systematic backtracking on the agreement.

When the district removed its mask mandate in March in violation of its own safety agreement, the CTU did nothing to mobilize opposition against the Democrats' and ruling class's blatant disregard for teachers and students' lives. Instead, it promoted impotent appeals to the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board (IELRB), which is composed of appointees of the same big business parties which are attacking workers and carrying out these policies. Predictably, the board declined to issue an immediate injunction against the district and then scheduled its administrative hearing on the matter for June, after the end of the school year, a move completely accepted by the union.

CTU has also worked hard to contain anger at the CPS budget, which resulted in cuts affecting 23 percent of schools, leading to layoffs of teachers and other staff. The CTU has limited itself to small token protests and toothless criticisms of Lightfoot and the district, hoping to dissipate opposition.

The CTU is extremely concerned to maintain its role as a trusted partner of the city's political establishment. The union has said it intends to seek a continuation of the worthless "safety agreement" it forced through in January.

Opposition among teachers and students to the criminal subordination of their lives to corporate profits will reemerge, however, sooner rather than later. This opposition will combine with anger which is building over a whole number of burning social problems, from surging inflation to the ever-present danger of mass shootings in school.

Teachers and other CPS workers, as well as parents, must begin to organize now against the unsafe reopening of in-person school in the fall, especially given the dangers of the new coronavirus subvariants which are emerging.

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, along with similar committees initiated by teachers in other cities, is the only organization which has fought for a genuinely scientific policy to protect the health and lives of teachers and students. We urge all those who agree with this perspective to join and help build this committee today. Text 312-834-4773 or email chicagoeducatorscommittee@gmail.com to learn more.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site