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California high school students speak out on massive respiratory virus outbreak at school

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Major outbreaks of respiratory viruses, including the flu, have recently occurred in schools throughout San Diego County in California, with more than 1,000 students out sick last week at Patrick Henry High School alone. In the neighboring Poway Unified School District, at least 400 students at Del Norte High School were out sick last Wednesday.

According to San Diego County Public Health Services (SDPHS), there have been no known hospitalizations linked to the outbreak at Patrick Henry High School. However, the outbreak comes as pediatric hospitalizations have surged throughout the US, including at Rady Children’s Hospital in San Diego, due to multiple respiratory viruses spreading at once. The entire political establishment has raised virtually no alarm to the rise in flu, RSV, rhinovirus and enteroviruses cases and hospitalizations as another COVID-19 surge looms in the US.

The outbreaks in San Diego, thought to be predominantly caused by influenza, take place following the recent reopening of K-12 schools under conditions in which all COVID-19 mitigation measures have been dropped following the latest anti-scientific guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Supporting President Joe Biden’s declaration that “the pandemic is over,” these changes include ending universal masking in hospitals and moving from daily to weekly reporting of COVID-19 infections and deaths.

Influenza cases and deaths in the US virtually disappeared in 2020, as public health measures used to stop the spread of COVID-19 also apply to other airborne viruses such as the flu. However, all mitigations have been abandoned at the state and federal levels and the same let it rip policies that have been adopted for COVID-19 are being used in response to the present surge in respiratory viruses.

On Sunday, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Mena and Leia, two students from Patrick Henry High School, about last week’s outbreak and its impacts on students.

Rena Cassimeda (RC): What is it like in your school right now due to the outbreak?

Mena: Our school is practically half empty right now, with between 800–1,400 students out on any given day within the last week (for reference, we have over 2,600 students enrolled). We

had about 1,200 homecoming ticket sales, give or take, but the illness definitely spread on the Monday after the [homecoming] dance.

Although the dance was incredibly crowded, every component of it was held [outside] within our quad and parking lot area. I want to emphasize that it was not school neglect that caused the outbreak, but rather misfortune and the inherent risk of holding such a large event...

No classes have been canceled, nor has school been altogether, but classrooms are like a ghost town now... The students I know that have caught the flu have been out for multiple days, if not the entire week.

RC: How has your school and district responded to the outbreak? Have students been tested for COVID-19?

Mena: Patrick Henry has mass emailed all parents about the outbreak to explain the situation and has advised teachers to hold back on current classwork and assessments. They have also tested hundreds of students for COVID to find almost entirely negative results, while those that they’ve tested for the flu have been confirmed to be positive. The San Diego Unified School District has sent out accurate information regarding flu prevention as well and assisted families with finding locations that administer the flu shot. At the moment, COVID is not spreading any more than it usually would, our main issue most definitely is the flu. Students have the option to get COVID tests from our library, but it has not been mandated by the school.

RC: Where do you think these viruses are mostly spreading? What are conditions like in the classrooms? Are they ventilated, are there masking protocols, etc?

Mena: Mass school gatherings, such as pep rallies, football games and school dances where students are packed tightly in student sections and mosh pits are mostly responsible for the recent flu outbreak. Though school sponsored activities are largely held outdoors, these crowds still get really dense. The school has not enforced masking requirements since last spring, so it’s rare to see students and teachers wearing masks around campus. Every classroom is equipped with COVID safety equipment, such as air filtration devices, but it’s dependent on the teacher whether or not these are actually used. More often than not though, students are

welcome to turn on any safety devices in the room and to open up the windows and doors for ventilation.

Leia: I know of multiple people that showed up to the homecoming dance and the game the night before that were sick. The dance floor was completely packed with kids sweating and breathing on each other, and I think that's where a lot of transmission probably happened.

I think that transmission is happening in a lot of different ways and places. I think any place where kids are interacting, transmission is happening. My best guess is that it's happening at lunch and in the classroom mostly. At lunch, kids usually group up without masks on, which could explain the high rate of kids out. But I also think a lot of it is happening in classrooms because in many of my classes, whole table groups will drop and be absent at almost the exact same time as each other or will gradually drop within days.

RC: What are other students saying about the outbreak, what are students' concerns?

Leia: A lot of students just don't want to get it. Mostly, we are just joking around with it, as that is how a lot of us deal with hard situations. At first, a lot of kids were super concerned it was COVID, but after a lot of testing, we stopped being super concerned about that. I think students just want to avoid contracting whatever it is, because it has made a lot of kids super sick. A little under half of the kids have started masking up again in order to avoid getting or spreading it, and more have been gradually joining in.

RC: Experts are anticipating another COVID surge here in the next month as cases are currently rising throughout Europe. What are your thoughts on the lifting of COVID protocols such as masking, testing, contact tracing in high transmission places like hospitals and schools?

Mena: People forget that COVID protocols also protect us from other illnesses that tend to spread around this time of year, like the flu. The inconsistency with which these measures are enforced is very likely why we keep seeing these waves of COVID coming up over and over again, and if we were to persist with masking, testing, contact tracing and all that, we might see a lasting effect when cases eventually lower again.

Leia: I think that we 100 percent need to look to medical professionals in this situation. COVID cases have dropped significantly in the San Diego area since the height of the pandemic, but that does not mean that they can't spike again. The opinions of medical professionals are key in this situation, and if they say that we need to be masking up and reinstating our measures to prevent the spread, then we need to be doing that.

RC: How has COVID and the pandemic impacted students and families?

Leia: I think that COVID was particularly hard on students. The COVID online school era was extraordinarily difficult for a lot of us when it came to learning and retaining information. For instance, my Spanish class in sophomore year had to essentially reteach all of year 1 Spanish, as the COVID online year was so difficult for students that they didn't remember anything from their first Spanish class. On the health side, a lot of my friends are severely immunocompromised and cannot afford to contract

COVID without it very severely affecting their health. This has led to a lot of fear and loss of time in class for these kids while they try their best to avoid getting COVID, which puts them at a disadvantage.

A lot of kids, including myself, also fell into chronic absenteeism. Coupled with the amount of time spent outside of school when you test positive, a lot of us lost a lot of the motivation to be at school during and after the pandemic. The pandemic exposed a lot of mental health issues in students and made a lot of them worse. A lot of students, particularly those who are in underserved communities and those who have unaccepting families cannot get the help they need to deal with these issues due to how expensive mental health care is and the stigma that still surrounds it.

RC: The WWSWS is calling for a global policy of eliminating COVID-19, which could be done with a coordinated global effort to stop the spread using public health measures. Have you heard of this, and what do you think about redirecting societal wealth (for instance money spent on war) to put a stop to the claims that we have to "learn to live with the virus"?

Leia: I have not heard of this, but I will be looking into it. I think that redirecting even just a portion of the money that we use on things like war and defense spending into public health measures and eliminating COVID would benefit people to a significant degree. The claim that we must "learn to live with COVID" ignores the fact that a significant portion of our population CANNOT live with COVID, as getting it is extremely dangerous for them. Immunocompromised people cannot just "live with COVID."

Ignoring this so that the general public doesn't have to think about COVID precautions, and the government can continue using tax dollars on meaningless war spending and things that, in the end, only benefit the wealthy and powerful, is ableist, classist and unsurprisingly inherently and fundamentally capitalist.

The American government has got to stop caring more about imperialism and our military instead of caring about American citizens, and particularly the most vulnerable and underserved of us. But they have time and time again disappointed us by not caring and not taking action, and instead prioritizing what makes the most money and keeps the status quo.

We need to direct money and time into eliminating COVID for everyone, but particularly for the immunocompromised and those in poverty, as they are the most susceptible to the worst effects of the disease. Plain and simple.



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