

As new school year begins

Los Angeles school district officials encourage sick students to attend school and spread infection

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Smita Malhotra, chief medical director of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), published a tweet Sunday encouraging parents of the district's 565,000 students to send their children to school even if they were experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 or other illnesses. "It is not practical," Malhotra wrote, "for working parents to keep children home from school for every runny nose, nor is it in the best interest of children to miss school after pandemic school closures."

In a statement that brazenly and criminally ignored the history of the COVID-19 pandemic and the principles of public health more generally, the chief medical director wrote, "My message to parents is this: schools are some of the safest places for children to be."

These sentiments were echoed by the entire leadership of the district as well. "We're back at a point—based on high levels of vaccination, therapeutics available and children's higher resiliency than most—where a child is mildly sick—no fever, just maybe the sniffles—it is OK for them to go to school," according to LAUSD superintendent Alberto Carvalho.

In fact, such statements not only downplay the danger of COVID-19, but are actively encouraging students and their families to contract the disease. As students at LAUSD and across the country begin the new academic year, COVID-19 numbers continue to rise in what is now a new, dangerous wave of the pandemic. US hospital admissions have risen 43 percent since late June, while wastewater testing indicates approximately 4.4 million new COVID cases in the US each week. With Long COVID, according to the most conservative estimates, affecting 10 percent of those infected, more than 400,000 will contract the condition each week as well.

According to a June study published ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ the *American Medical Association*, researchers working out of Boston Children's Hospital found that 70.4 percent of infections in nearly 850,000 households sampled originated in childhood transmission.

The study took samples from a period starting in September 2020 until October 2022. Rates of pediatric transmission fluctuated during the course of the study, with the lowest transmission during the summer months, in accordance with the reality that schools are a primary source of COVID-19 transmission. According to the study's authors, "Once US schools reopened in fall 2020, children contributed more to inferred within household transmission when they were in school, and less during summer and winter breaks."

Not only does in-person learning increase the risk of COVID-19 infections in households and surrounding communities, it also increases risk among the schoolchildren themselves. Leaving aside the heightened risk of infected children passing along the disease to family members and their communities, children themselves are at a high risk of hospitalization and debilitation from the highly communicable virus, despite claims of LAUSD officials to the contrary. In New York City alone, pediatric hospitalizations for COVID-19 are the highest they have been since August 2020.

Recent research also continues to reveal dangerous impacts of COVID-19 infection, including increased risk of heart disease, dementia and system organ damage. This is apart from the increased risk of Long COVID, which is, for all intents and purposes, a disabling event, preventing workers from performing their jobs and students from learning and successfully completing their schoolwork.

Due to the dangers of infection, millions of students across the US have been chronically absent at record rates, with LAUSD absenteeism even higher than the national average. Chronic absence is defined as missing at least 10 percent of a given school year, or approximately one month of learning time.

According to studies conducted by Stanford University together with the Associated Press, more than a quarter of all students nationwide were considered chronically absent for the 2021-2022 school year, the most recent year for which such data was available. Chronic absenteeism was considerably higher in LAUSD itself, which recorded a 40.3 percent rate during the 2021-2022 academic year.

Superintendent Carvalho has claimed that district data shows a 10 percent drop in chronic absenteeism during the 2022-2023 school year. If true, this still represents a significant increase over the pre-pandemic level of 20 percent.

In addition to fears over the pandemic, higher absentee rates are often due to cuts to school programs. Students with chronic health conditions or in need of counseling often find themselves unable to cope in schools with fewer nurses and counselors to help them.

Such abysmal staffing ratios and the atrocious conditions in Los Angeles schools overall are the direct result of the betrayals of the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) and SEIU Local 99, which nominally represent teachers and school support staff respectively.

In the most recent contract reached between the UTLA and the district last April, none of the promised increases in nursing and counseling staff was achieved. The contract only allows for a grievance procedure once per year if adequate nurses are not in place, and the district is allowed to continually hold such grievance procedures in abeyance.

The counseling ratio in the contract is set at 500 students per counselor, twice the ratio of 250 students per counselor recommended by the American School Counselor Association. In fact, the counseling ratio provisions turned out to be completely unenforceable, as Superintendent Carvalho announced significant cuts to mental health services for the 2023-2024 academic year, a move which encountered no opposition from the UTLA.

It was in fact the UTLA, in collaboration with the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and the Biden administration, which was instrumental in reopening schools for in-person learning while the pandemic was still infecting hundreds of

thousands throughout the city and county of Los Angeles.

During rushed voting procedures in 2021, the UTLA told worried teachers that they had two options: either vote to return to in-person learning in COVID-infected classrooms under the district's plan, or return to in-person learning under the union's plan. No option was provided to continue remote learning and save lives until the disease was either eliminated or significantly curtailed.

Efforts by rank and file teachers and students, supported by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*, to prevent the dangerous return to classrooms in the midst of the pandemic, encountered vicious opposition, not only from the trade union apparatus but from middle class pseudo-left groups, particularly the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

In early 2022, *Jacobin* magazine, the main publication associated with the DSA, published an article calling on city of Chicago to "open the schools" immediately after city teachers overwhelmingly rejected a return to classrooms in a January 4 vote.

As early as September 2020, *Jacobin* published a favorable interview with Katherine Yih and Martin Kulldorf, far right advocates of the anti-scientific conception of "herd immunity." The article made clear that going forward, *Jacobin* and the DSA, a faction of the Democratic Party, would focus their efforts on subordinating the welfare and very lives of students, teachers and working class communities to the interests of private profit that they defend.



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