



Speak Out Now

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Education – Another Covid Casualty

In recent weeks, teachers and students all over the U.S. have held meetings, demonstrations, and sick-outs protesting the lack of health and safety measures in their schools. These protests were organized as many schools reopened after winter break with unclear and contradictory safety guidelines from both the CDC (Center for Disease Control) and local school authorities. Many schools lacked sufficient Covid tests, appropriate masks, contact tracing, ventilation, and outdoor eating equipment. Parents lacked clear guidance about testing. With fewer teachers and staff at work, as many got sick, those still working faced even more duties - an almost impossible task.

This experience during the Covid surge highlighted the challenges faced by staff, students, and families. Educators are torn between wanting to continue in-person learning, and demanding a temporary return to distance learning when schools are unsafe. Many students are overjoyed to be back in school with their friends, but appalled by the lack of safety protocols that should have been in place months ago.

These conditions during the Omicron surge repeat the impossible choice that faced many working-class parents throughout the pandemic: stay home with their kids but risk losing their jobs, or go to work and leave their kids on their own with no adult supervision. The decision to keep schools open with minimal safety protocols, were made by those in power, with no input or feedback from students, staff, and families.

The problems of health and safety compounded the pre-existing problems in the education system. Funding cuts to education over the last several decades have decimated art, music and PE programs and led to shortages of teachers, dilapidated school buildings, unsafe drinking water, and 30 to 40 students in a classroom. While politicians cut school

budgets, they left bloated administrative budgets in place. Corporate-funded charter schools, were often opened at the closed school sites, which further reduced the number of students in the public schools.

The poorest neighborhoods, with a large concentration of Black students and other students of color have been disproportionately impacted. Studies show that across all school districts in the U.S., \$2,200 less is spent per year on students of color compared to white students.

During the pandemic, many politicians insisted that they are deeply concerned about students' learning loss as a result of distance learning during the pandemic. Where is their distress about the fact that one in five students don't even have access to a school counselor? That 25% of schools have no access to a nurse? That up to 40% of schools that have been tested have elevated levels of lead in the water? And where was their concern to ensure that all schools had the resources they needed to make in-person learning as safe as possible?

The reality is that schools are being kept open primarily to warehouse children and ensure that their parents go to work.

In a society that prioritized the life and health of all people, every person would have access to a free education that empowered them to reach their full potential. But under capitalism, the purpose of education is to keep schools open so that the economy keeps going and the profits keep rolling in.

Students and teachers were right to take matters into their own hands with protests and strikes. Staff, students, and families are the ones who truly care about the health and safety of children, and only a real social struggle that unites all of them can win the kind of education system that students deserve.