

Title: Schools should re-open for in-person learning with safety measures, say Chicago Public School parents who are also healthcare professionals

We are parents of Chicago Public Schools students and healthcare professionals. With both our medical experience during the pandemic and our experience as parents, we strongly advocate for schools to re-open for in-person learning with multi-layered mitigation strategies to minimize spread of COVID-19.

The pandemic has been devastating. In Chicago, there have been ~225,000 cases and 4,500 deaths. Since the beginning, many of us have been on the front-lines caring for individuals with COVID-19. We have also helped our patients and their families manage exposures, symptoms, and risks.

At the same time, we have witnessed the irreparable harm of this pandemic on children, harms exacerbated by keeping schools closed. More families are [facing hardship](#), including food insecurity, housing instability, and unemployment. The pandemic has negatively affected children's [mental health](#) with increased rates of depression, anxiety, and [suicide](#). There are less clearly-measured impacts on children, such as exposure to domestic violence and abuse as well as dropping out of school to care for siblings or go to work. These effects will plague children well beyond the pandemic, yet return to school has potential to lessen their impact.

We know not all families are ready to come back to in-person learning right away. That is ok. However, this does not mean that schools are unsafe spaces. Rather, it creates an opportunity to meet children and families where they are and to implement and refine safety protocols before large numbers of students return in-person.

Some families and school personnel believe it is unsafe to be in school. We understand and grieve the losses our communities have suffered. We acknowledge the anxiety about the return to in-person school. We are writing to help lessen the fear for children and parents, teachers and staff, as well as their families. We want people from all communities across Chicago to know that with mitigation strategies in place schools are [safe](#).

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has put together a [reopening plan](#) in alignment with [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) and [Illinois Department of Public Health](#) guidelines. It includes [key elements](#) to prevent COVID-19 transmission, including wearing masks, social distancing, health screening, and contact tracing. [None of these layers are perfect alone but together these elements strengthen](#) our defense in the spread of COVID. They reflect best practices, similar to those taken in hospitals/clinics as well as other schools around the country and the world. Here in Chicago, [parochial](#) and private schools as well as daycares have reopened and stayed open for months without significant outbreaks and without impacting local COVID rates.

Now let's be frank: there have been cases of COVID-19 among individuals in schools, both in Chicago and [nationally](#). [CPS is no different](#). Given ongoing community transmission, it is inevitable that there will be some COVID-19 cases among students and school personnel.

Fortunately, the [risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools can be effectively reduced](#) with symptom screening, hand hygiene, universal masking, and distancing. The goal is to prevent the spread of COVID. In fact, local schools have done this effectively as the [overall transmission rate within Chicago Catholic schools was lower than the community](#) rates. [Local](#) and [national](#) data also show that outbreaks within schools are acquired outside of the school building. Importantly, [in-school transmission is rare](#), with minimal student-to-teacher spread, when safety measures are in place.

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has made various [demands](#) for reopening, some of which do not align with scientific evidence. The 3% positivity rate is [problematic](#), and schools, like in New York City, have safely reopened in communities with higher positivity rates. Given the rapidly changing landscape, the CDC has shared [dynamic metrics for opening](#). While we wholeheartedly believe all school personnel should be vaccinated, school re-opening should not be delayed while vaccination is in process. Vaccines are not the only strategy to prevent COVID-19 and it is unlikely all CPS personnel will consent to vaccination, just as [up to 40% of healthcare workers](#) have opted not to receive the vaccine to date. In addition, while we support CTU's efforts to reduce housing insecurity and homelessness, their demand to make re-opening contingent on certain support services seems unrealistic, particularly when in-person learning can help alleviate some of those challenges.

While the district and union continue to battle over reopening, our children are caught in the crossfire. Teachers, staff, and administrators across the district have been incredible during a complex and difficult time. Rather than debating about whether to re-open and taking votes about returning in-person, it's time to shift focus. The primary efforts right now should include:

- identifying and addressing specific needs at each school for safe re-opening, including equipment and staffing, with creative models to ensure equity across the district
- sharing scientific information with school personnel and families about preventing COVID-19 spread to help ensure safety as well as lower fear and anxiety
- adopting best practices for classrooms and schools, including using appropriate personal protective equipment and enforcing safety measures
- raising awareness about COVID-19 vaccine among school personnel
- educating parents, students, and school personnel about their shared responsibility in safely reopening schools, as everyone must maintain COVID-19 safety measures (masks, distancing, hand hygiene) outside of school
- disseminating clear protocols for quarantine and testing in case students or school personnel have symptoms, are exposed, or test positive

If school reopening is approached collaboratively, with all stakeholders--including parents--at the table, schools can be opened safely. As a city, we must prioritize our youth and invest in their future. During this challenging time, getting children back in the classroom is the number one way to show this commitment. CPS should disseminate evidence-based information to families, share data transparently, and ensure schools have necessary equipment and clear protocols. CTU should use their voice to share evidence-based information about COVID-19 and the vaccine to their members.

Given the hardships children have endured due to the pandemic and remote learning, plus the robust data supporting reopening with safety measures in place, we strongly support efforts to have children back in schools. We want to see our city's children--including our own--learning in person with their teachers and socializing with their peers. We stand prepared to help support the re-opening of CPS to in-person learning.

Signed,

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