

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

What It Really Takes to Keep Schools Open during the Omicron Surge

Source: Anya Kamenetz, NPR.org, January 7, 2021

Brittany Gonzalez has 10 students, and only five of them consistently wear masks. She teaches special education to second- and third-graders in Lee County, Fla.

"It is a foreign piece of cloth on their face," she says. "And not all of them have the level of understanding as to why we're doing it and what it means and how to wear it."

Gonzalez knows that showing up to work every day in person, as she has since fall 2020, means risking exposure to COVID-19.

"I have not been — knock on wood — impacted by a death personally," she says. "But a lot of people around my county have. So it's very scary."

In a rare show of pandemic consensus, political leaders at all levels are singing from the same hymnal when it comes to in-person learning during the omicron surge. Governors as ideologically far apart as Ron DeSantis in Florida and Gavin Newsom in California are pledging to keep classrooms open, and President Biden has said "schools should remain open." The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has updated its schools guidance, underlining that it's possible to limit COVID-19 transmission even during an outbreak, given proper mitigation. And indeed, according to Burbio, an organization that tracks individual school and district websites, most U.S. schools are open for in-person learning.

But NPR interviewed teachers and administrators from around the country, and they say the devil is in the details. Schools are just starting to get consistent access to testing. Teachers are still, in 2022, paying out of pocket for essential safety equipment like high-quality masks and air purifiers. And qualified staff, from substitutes to bus drivers, can't be conjured out of thin air, even when federal dollars exist to pay for them.

"I see people on Twitter, you know, 'Just open the schools! Just open the schools!' " says Joseph Ricca. He's the superintendent of White Plains Public Schools, in New York, which is open for in-person learning. "Every teacher and every administrator and every parent wants to open the schools. But it's not just opening schools, it's are the schools safe? Are they staffed? Are the children coming? Do you have everything you need? ... A lot of these 'just open' proclamations are coming from folks who are comfortably seated in their own home."

Schools are trying to use tests to stay safe, but it isn't easy

The CDC has placed increasing emphasis on the use of tests, including rapid tests, to prevent transmission in schools and to keep exposed students in school.

Some districts, like Seattle and Washington, D.C., canceled classes for a day or more to test students coming back from winter break. And states and cities have purchased and sent millions of tests to schools in the past few weeks. Besides general screening, these can be used in "test to stay" programs, where students who are exposed to COVID-19 can avoid quarantines and keep coming to class as long as they test negative.

But the increased demand for tests, combined with rising cases, has led to lab delays and logistical snarls.

Chicago, where teachers this week refused to teach in person due to safety concerns, is a case in point: Over winter break, Chicago Public Schools distributed about 150,000 take-home COVID-19 tests to students, directing them to communities hardest hit by the virus. Families were supposed to mail back the samples for results. Then the trouble started.

Local news reports show FedEx drop boxes that were overflowing with completed test kits, piled on sidewalks, in the snow. CPS reported 35,944 tests were completed between Dec. 26 and Jan. 1, but 25,026 — nearly 70% — were ruled invalid. In response to a request for comment from NPR, CPS gave a statement that read, in part: "Over the holiday weekend, we learned from our vendors, ThermoFisher and Color, that more than half of the 40,000 submitted tests could not be validated. While we continue to seek answers, we are focused on increasing on-site testing opportunities for the impacted students and schools this week as part of our ongoing weekly testing."

New York state provided Ricca, the superintendent in White Plains, with one rapid test for each of his 7,000-odd students during winter break.

"Kudos to the New York state government for recognizing we've got to get tests in the hands of schools if we expect schools to stay open," he says. But he's already put more orders in, knowing that they're going to be using the tests continuously and the supply is unpredictable.

"We have lines out the door" at testing centers, says Gonzalez, in Florida. "I personally don't know that if I needed to do a test today, I could."

There aren't enough substitutes and bus drivers to cover quarantining staff

Insufficient testing can snowball into staff and student absences. Aaron Neimark, who teaches kindergarten in San Francisco, missed the first few days back from winter break because he was waiting for the results of a PCR test after being

exposed.

He said a lot of his colleagues were out too. "It was about like eight or nine teachers [out] with only one substitute."

Schools have had to close or limit service because of staff shortages since earlier in the fall. Montgomery County Public Schools, a large, affluent district in Maryland, canceled scores of bus routes earlier this week because of a lack of drivers.

A music teacher, a superintendent and an instructional coach who typically trains teachers all told NPR they are pinch-hitting as substitutes. Other teachers said they are giving up their planning periods to cover classes.

Kennita Ballard teaches sixth grade at an all-girls, primarily Black public school in Louisville, Ky. There's a nationwide shortage of substitute teachers, but she says it hits even harder in schools like hers.

"We're just trying to put bodies into the classroom, and not all the bodies that we're putting into the classroom need to be around all of our children," she says. "There's a portion of our subs who cannot be in [schools like mine] because ... they bring in ... their not-so-implicit biases."

She says the educational mission suffers when too many classes are covered by stand-ins. "We are not here to be babysitters and to make sure that they are eating and breathing. No. As teachers, we're not able to do what we have gone to school for a number of years to be able to do — build out this generation of critical thinkers and future leaders."

Safety equipment can be hard to find

Most of the teachers NPR spoke with were providing their own masks, paying for them out of pocket. Ballard, in Kentucky, chooses pink KN95s to express her individuality. The district says N95 masks were delivered to schools starting this week, but Ballard says she hasn't seen them yet.

Making sure students have the right safety supplies adds another layer of difficulty. Neimark, in San Francisco, says, "The kids are going to come with either their own cloth mask, which is almost useless, or the surgical mask, which is almost as useless because you can't really have a 5-year-old double mask. They need those little KN95s, but we don't have those yet."

William Baur, a high school science teacher in Vancouver, Wash., has repurposed a piece of science lab equipment for COVID-19 safety: a carbon dioxide monitor, which indicates the quality of ventilation in his classroom.

"The previous school [I was] at didn't have a central HVAC system, so the CO2 levels would get pretty elevated," he says. He's also spent a few hundred dollars out of pocket hacking together DIY air purifiers, using box fans.

Everyone agrees kids need school

Every educator NPR spoke with described navigating an emotional storm as the omicron variant continues to spread. They're trying to give kids continuity, warmth and normalcy, while also watching out for signs of illness that can send students and teachers home abruptly. Teachers say they're reliving the scary days of the early pandemic and wondering what is going to happen next.

"We can feel the intensity," says Gonzalez, in Florida. "I don't want to say hysteria, because it's not hysteria — it's warranted. But you can start feeling the mounting pressure here again, that it's coming back."

She describes calling a mother to pick up a student with a runny nose on the first day of school after winter break. Gonzalez herself has two children attending the school where she teaches and has had to quarantine multiple times, so she sympathized with that working mother.

We're kind of in this stalemate in 2022, because we're trying to protect your kid and you're trying to live your life.

"It's very hard to go to work, and two hours later: 'Hi, it's the school district. You need to come pick up your kid or else they're going to sit in an isolation room until you do.' It's kind of scary and sad and frustrating, but we're kind of in this stalemate in 2022, because we're trying to protect your kid and you're trying to live your life. But you also want us to protect your kids, and we have to figure out a way to make it work."

Ricca, in White Plains, says, "All of us have been sustaining some level of trauma since March of 2020. We're going to be dealing with the effects of the pandemic for years to come. But it's certainly going to be a larger problem if we start taking steps backwards. In our community, in White Plains, the preponderance of parents and guardians and faculty and staff members want our schools open. We know how important it is for kids to be in school."

Ballard, in Kentucky, feels the surge "looming" and is worried that higher poverty schools like hers will be disproportionately driven into remote learning because of staff shortages. She says she's trying to reassure her students:

"Hey, if you need me, you all have my number. We've gotten through this before, we're going to get through this again. Trust your teachers here, that we are competent enough, going into this nebulous future."

Ballard says she wants her students to know that above all, she's got their back.

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about keeping schools open during the Omicron surge? Explain.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.