

LEARN MORE ABOUT SUBSCRIPTIONS

Stimulus check updates: Here's when to expect payments, other benefits



Column: With Meghan as Princess of the Woke, we'll skip England for a while



Judge orders former 'Windy City Rehab' contractor to pay Chicago supply



During pandemic, Illinois saw 27% jump in deaths, among worst in the US. One



COMMENTARY OPINION

Op-ed: As parents and doctors, we call on CPS to open schools with safety measures

FEB

By ANNA VOLERMAN BEASER, CHRISOULA ANDRESSAKIS CHUCHRO AND PREETHI RAGHUPATRUNI
CHICAGO TRIBUNE | JAN 26, 2021 AT 1:29 PM



Some CPS schools reopen

About 6,500 CPS students in pre-kindergarten and special education were due to arrive to schools for in-person learning. (Brian Cassella / Chicago Tribune)

We are parents of Chicago Public Schools students and doctors, writing on behalf of a group of CPS parents who are health care professionals across this city. With both our medical experience during the pandemic and our experience as parents,

we strongly advocate for schools to reopen for in-person learning with multilayered mitigation strategies to minimize spread of COVID-19.

ADVERTISEMENT

LATEST COMMENTARY

COMMENTARY

Op-ed: Zombies, murder hornets and UFOs: There's nothing we can't handle after this year of COVID-19

MAR 10, 2021



COMMENTARY

Op-ed: Gig workers, take note: This legislation would hurt the self-employed

MAR 10, 2021

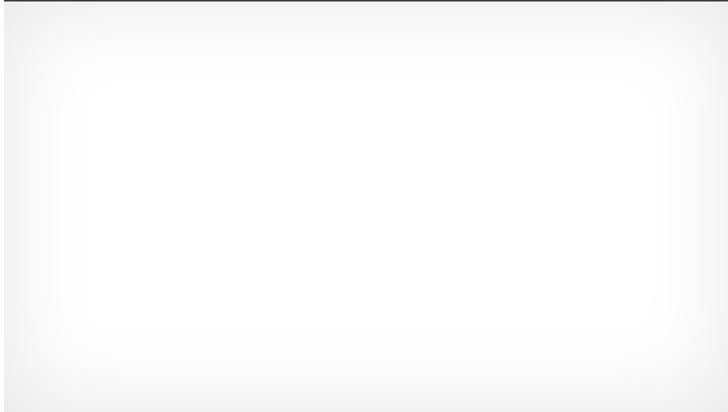


COMMENTARY





The pandemic has been devastating. [In Chicago, there have been](#) more than 230,000 cases and more than 4,500 deaths. Since the beginning, many of us have been on the front lines caring for individuals with COVID-19. We also have 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, harm 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 a return to school has potential to lessen their impact.

We know not all families are ready to go 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](#).

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-19. 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 day cares, have reopened and stayed open for months without significant outbreaks and without impacting local COVID-19 rates.

The Chicago Tribune opinion section publishes op-eds from readers and experts about specific issues of the day. Op-eds reflect the views of the writer and not necessarily the [Chicago Tribune](#).

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-19. 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 has made various [demands](#) for reopening, some of which do not align with scientific evidence. The 3% positivity rate is [problematic](#), and schools, such as those 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 reopening 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 health care workers](#) have opted not to receive the vaccine to date.

In addition, while we support CTU's efforts to reduce housing insecurity and homelessness, its demand to make reopening 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 reopen 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 reopening, 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 No. 1 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 its voice to share evidence-based information about COVID-19 and the vaccine with its 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 reopening of CPS to in-person learning.

Anna Volerman, M.D., is an internist and pediatrician in Chicago. Chrisoula Andressakis Chuchro, M.D., is a physical medicine and rehabilitation physician in Chicago. Preethi Raghupatruni, M.D., is a pediatrician in Chicago.

The opinions included here represent individuals' perspectives and not the views of our employers.

Submit a letter, of no more than 400 words, to the editor [here](#) or email letters@chicagotribune.com.

Get our latest editorials, op-eds and columns, delivered twice a week in our Fighting Words newsletter. [Sign up here](#).
