

Louisiana schools set to reopen in the coming weeks as pandemic surges in the state

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COVID-19 is surging throughout Louisiana as a result of premature school and business reopenings, the abandonment of mitigation strategies, and one of the lowest vaccination rates in the United States.

There were 1,503 new cases reported Thursday by the Louisiana Department of Health (LDH), an increase not seen since mid-February. The seven-day moving average reached 1,107 on July 15, a nearly 300 percent increase from a month ago. As of Friday, 504 people were hospitalized with the disease statewide, the highest number since mid-March.

Vaccinations, however, have stagnated for weeks. As of July 15, only 39.5 percent of the population had received at least one dose of a vaccine, and only 36 percent were fully vaccinated. In some areas of the state, the vaccination rates are as low as 25 percent.

According to a recent study by Georgetown University researchers, northern Louisiana is one of the most vulnerable areas in the US to coronavirus outbreaks and an area conducive to producing further virus mutations and variants. *NOLA.com* quoted one of the researchers, Shweta Bansal, as saying the “most significant” of the top five areas identified as high-risk is the zone that covers Louisiana.

Local experts voiced concern about the threat of future variants. Tulane epidemiologist Susan Hassig told *NOLA.com*, “Every time it moves from one person to another person, it’s an opportunity for a new variant to develop. This is what viruses do. When they have the opportunity to spread, they will continue to mutate.” Though the current vaccines remain largely effective against the Delta variant, the threat is that with mitigation efforts thrown out and the virus allowed to spread freely, mutations will occur that evade vaccine immunity.

The situation is dire for the state’s majority unvaccinated population. Since May, 94 percent of all known cases have occurred in unvaccinated individuals.

The age of patients being admitted to hospitals is also decreasing. Speaking to *The Advocate*, Dr. Britni Hebert, a doctor of internal medicine in Lafayette, said, it “is no longer the 70- and 80-year-old grandparents that are suffering and dying from COVID. These are 23-year-olds. They’re 15-year-olds. They’re 35-year-olds. They’re young parents.” Likewise, Dr. Frank Courmier, medical director for pulmonary and critical services at Our Lady of Lourdes Regional Medical Center in Lafayette, told *CNN*, “We’re getting people in their third and fourth decades, otherwise healthy with no real preexisting conditions coming in, unvaccinated and very sick, very fast.”

There is also growing concern about the standard of care dropping as the surge continues. Dr. Catherine O’Neal, chief medical officer and infectious disease specialist at Our Lady of the Lake Hospital in Baton Rouge, told *The Advocate*, “...what we do not have and what is in extremely short supply is nursing staffing, physical therapy staffing, respiratory therapy staffing, and we can’t get them... Your illness will be worse because of the surge... I worry about continuing to offer the same standard of care for everyone who walks in our doors.”

Touching upon the spread of the disease among children in the state, Dr. Jennifer Avegno, director of the New Orleans Health Department, reported to the local city council, “...we are seeing a lot of our outbreaks that are happening at daycares, at summer camps, among kids who are not vaccinated. Again, we still see that kids have a much milder course but they’re bringing it home and they’re spreading it.” She also brought attention to the situation in neighboring Mississippi, where seven children are currently in the ICU with the Delta variant and two are on life-support.

It is within this context that the Louisiana Department of Education released its “guidelines” for in-person school reopenings for the Fall 2021 semester. In most

areas of the state, schools are set to reopen by mid-August. The guidelines follow the recent CDC's scrapping of mask mandates in schools. "The State of Louisiana has not issued a mandate relative to the use of facial coverings by students or faculty on a school campus or inside a school facility," the state Superintendent told reporters via video conference. It is "recommended" that unvaccinated students wear masks, but local school districts will have the authority to decide. Already, multiple school districts, including the largest, Orleans Parish, have removed mask mandates.

Educators on social media denounced the removal of this basic protective measure. One wrote, "Asking for trouble. This is not over yet. Is wearing a mask really all that difficult?" Another said, "It seems as if the governor is playing to popular opinion and not safety for all."

Early in June, the Louisiana Department of Health discontinued reporting on school-related COVID-19 outbreaks for the summer, despite record numbers of students enrolling for summer school. Nearly 200,000 students, roughly 30 percent of total public school students, enrolled in summer school, a four-fold increase from years prior. Despite no data being made public, the fact that most children are not vaccinated, that masks and social distancing have been abandoned, and the high transmissibility of the Delta variant, it is reasonable to assume tens of thousands of children in the state are being infected by the virus.

In line with abandoning public health measures to stop the spread of COVID-19, the state is also removing what little social support is in place to protect against the economic consequences of the pandemic. In June, Democratic Governor John Bel Edwards agreed with Republican lawmakers to end the federal unemployment assistance, which adds \$300 a week to state benefits, in exchange for a miserly \$28 increase to the state's maximum weekly benefit. The state will discontinue accepting the federal benefits on July 31. Benefits will be cut off entirely for 100,000 contractors and "gig" workers who are not eligible for the state unemployment program, and those who remain eligible will be left with a maximum of \$247 a week.

The cutoff of unemployment benefits coincides with the expiration of the federal moratorium on evictions on July 31, threatening millions of households in the US with homelessness. Despite receiving \$308 million in federal rental assistance in December, Louisiana has only distributed \$8.8 million as of mid-June. Only 1,700 of nearly 20,000 tenants who have applied for the aid have

received assistance, according to *WGNO*. The Louisiana Fair Housing Action Center warned that over 101,000 households in the state reported being behind on rent payments.

This comes as a new report by the National Low Income Housing Coalition found that a full-time minimum wage worker in the US cannot afford housing *anywhere* in the US. In Louisiana, workers need to earn nearly \$18/hour to afford a market-rate two-bedroom apartment, or more in cities like New Orleans. A minimum wage worker in the state, who receives just \$7.25 an hour, would need to work 98 hours a week to afford a two-bedroom apartment. The federal standard for affordability is no more than 30 percent of gross income for housing and utilities.

Fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ruling class' response to it, the opioid epidemic reached new heights in the US in 2020, with Louisiana having the 5th highest number of deaths in the country with 1,930 victims, a 48 percent increase from 2019. Jefferson Parish Coroner Dr. Gerry Cvitanovich told *NOLA.com* that "...fentanyl overdose deaths in Jefferson this year [2021] are on pace to be two times higher than they were last year and four times higher than they were in 2019." Across the United States, 93,000 people died from overdoses in 2020, with the largest single-year increase on record.

The renewed upswing of the pandemic in Louisiana comes just weeks before schools are set to fully reopen for in-person learning with no protective measures in place. Educators, like all workers, must be conscious of the fact that the same struggles they faced last year will take on an even more feverish tone this year. With the full support of the national educators unions, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Educators Association, states and school districts across the country are falling in line behind the Biden administration's requirement that all schools be open in-person. Teachers, parents and students will be required to fight the deadly school reopenings independently of these organizations, and we encourage readers to take up the call to build rank-and-file committees to organize and unite their struggles.



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