



It's 2022, But Many Schools Are Reverting to 2020's COVID Playbook

It's up to parents to ensure their children have the normal and free childhood they deserve.

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January 3, 2022

It's 2022 but you'd be forgiven for thinking it's still 2020—especially if you have children enrolled in K-12 district schooling. Some parents are grappling this week with a return to, or threat of, remote learning first introduced nearly two years ago.

Fear of the fast-spreading Omicron variant of the coronavirus is leading school officials across the country to once again shutter schools. In [Cleveland](#), for example, this first week of school for the new year is entirely remote for public school students. Several districts throughout Ohio are following suit, while others are re-imposing 2020 virus-related restrictions or extending the holiday break into this week.

[Newark](#), New Jersey public schools announced they will be fully remote for the next two weeks, as did other districts throughout the state. Public schools in [Atlanta](#) will also be closed this week, reverting back to remote learning.

While New York City public schools have vowed to remain open, with enhanced virus testing, other districts in the state announced a return to remote learning, including the Mount Vernon Public Schools north of New York City which will be [closed](#) until “at least” January 18.

Washington, D.C. public schools plan to open for in-person learning this week after a two-day delay to allow all students and staff to show proof of a negative COVID-19 test, and the district warned that families should prepare for a shift to remote learning “throughout the semester, especially in the coming weeks,” according to [NBC](#).

Just as in 2020, teachers unions are instrumental in pushing for the school closures. In Chicago, the teachers union expressed [concern](#) over public schools reopening this week and is preparing for a possible [strike](#).

In Massachusetts, the state's largest teachers union called for a delay in returning to in-person learning this week, and requested greater “[flexibility](#)” from the state to switch to remote learning.

Several public school districts in the state announced they would be extending the holiday break, with plans to open later this week. Indeed, *The Wall Street Journal* reported on Sunday that more than 2,000 schools across the country will be closed for at least part of this week.

Parents Have Had Enough

While some parents, anxious about Omicron, likely applaud the effort to return to remote schooling and praise districts for their heightened coronavirus testing regimes and ongoing mitigation measures, other parents have had enough.

In a viral article last month, *New York Post* writer Karol Markowicz announced that she and her family are leaving their beloved New York City and its public schools for Florida, where schools have remained open and mask-free and children are able to experience a normal childhood. “The response to COVID-19 in New York, in particular where children are concerned, has driven our family out,” she wrote. “Children have been an afterthought, at best, and have had their childhoods casually destroyed by our heavy-handed, and ultimately ineffective, response. I can no longer subject my own kids to it.”

Markowicz is hardly alone. New data released by the US Census Bureau on December 21 reveal that Texas and Florida, two of the states that resisted burdensome coronavirus restrictions, saw the largest increase in population in 2021, while New York and California, among the states with the most oppressive virus-related policies, lost population. This migration pattern was apparent in other states as well in 2021, with areas imposing the strictest coronavirus policies losing population while freer states gained residents.

A recent *Economist* article points out that these southward mobility trends existed prior to 2020, as states such as Florida and Texas offer lower taxes, warmer weather, and greater housing affordability. But the COVID-19 response has accelerated these trends.

Parents such as Markowicz want to live in a place where their children can grow up freely, while entrepreneurs and shopkeepers want to make sure the state can’t suddenly shut down their businesses or force them to impose virus-related restrictions on their customers and employees. FEE’s new Fresh Start States project helps those migrating to freer states to embrace the principles that keep those states free, including the limited role of government in personal and economic affairs.

It’s not just southern states that are offering more freedom for families. In the Cato Institute’s 2021 Freedom in the 50 States report, New Hampshire took the top spot for personal and economic freedom, while New York scored at the bottom.

Public Schools Are Feeling the Exodus

Public schools in many big cities are feeling the exodus of families. According to a recent NPR analysis, Chicago Public Schools lost 14,000 students during the 2020/2021 academic year, and another 10,000 students this school year. Public schools in Los Angeles lost 17,000 students last year and another 9,000 this year, and New York City’s public schools lost 38,000 students last year and an additional 13,000 this year.

While some parents are fleeing cities and states with coronavirus mandates for their schoolchildren, others are fleeing schools altogether. Homeschooling continues to be a popular option for families, even as schools reopened for in-person learning this fall. After doubling in

2020 to more than 11 percent of the overall school-age population, the homeschooling rate remains historically high this year.

A recent report in Kansas, for example, shows homeschooling registrations tripled last year to more than 5,500 students and grew by an additional 2,250 this year, compared to 1,400 in a typical pre-pandemic year. Vermont shows a similar trend, with this year's new homeschooling registrations nearly 40 percent higher than pre-pandemic levels, on top of last year's record increase.

As public schools across the country entertain a return to remote schooling this year, and double-down on testing, social distancing, and masking requirements for kids, more parents undoubtedly will exit their local schools for other education options. Whether it's moving to a freer city or state, or pulling children out of school for homeschooling or microschooling, it's up to parents to ensure their children have the normal and free childhood they deserve.

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