

Fact check: GOP ignores the data to blame 'Biden' for school closures

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The Biden administration continues its efforts to get children back in the classroom.

More than 5,000 schools across the country pivoted to virtual instruction last week because of COVID-19 cases and resulting staffing shortages, according to Burbio, which tracks school reopening trends.

Republican lawmakers are claiming that Democratic mismanagement and subservience to "special interests" are responsible for the closures. However, statistics show that the school closures were the result of the fast-spreading omicron variant of the coronavirus and the schools' own responses to the resulting staffing shortages.

And the words and actions of the Biden administration have demonstrated continuing efforts to get children back in school.

"The science is clear: children belong in the classroom," Sen. Tim Scott (R-SC), a rumored candidate for president in 2024, tweeted Monday. "Democrats are setting science aside and caving to special interests."

"Joe Biden promised the country would not 'shut down,' but: thousands of flights are being canceled, office buildings are empty, Democrat politicians are trying to close schools," the Republican National Committee posted on Twitter last week. "Biden lied."

Another Twitter account run by the RNC insinuated that the closures were somehow a result of hypocrisy on President Joe Biden's part: "FLASHBACK to Biden in February: School closures are 'a national emergency...I think about the price so many of my grandkids and your kids are going to pay.' TODAY: Thousands of schools around the country are closing, and Biden is silent."

"Biden has all the leverage," former Trump adviser Stephen Miller said Monday. "Leftist teachers' unions are his base. He could call and reopen schools today, but he won't—because he puts radical education bureaucrats before American children. He owns this, and owns this completely."

While Republicans use the newest school closings as fodder for fundraising appeals and charge that school closings are the result of Democratic mismanagement and machinations by teachers unions, the Wall Street Journal noted on Jan. 9, according to the data website Burbio, the over 5,000 schools that had closed in the previous week did so due to staff shortages resulting from COVID infections.

The U.S. is experiencing a surge in the number of new COVID-19 cases due to the omicron variant of the coronavirus, with more than 500,000 new cases a day disrupting schools, canceling flights, and pushing back workplace reopening plans.

Even the right-wing Cato Institute, while blaming the unions for their approach to educational "choice" in general, suggests that they are not responsible for the school closures, and that most American parents do not want their children in schools while the coronavirus continues to spread.

One case in which a union is taking a highly visible role in closing schools was the Chicago Public Schools, which was embroiled in a dispute over safety measures with the Chicago Teachers Union that had closed the city's 653 schools for several days. On Monday evening, the

sides announced they had reached an agreement that would open the schools for in-person learning on Wednesday, but not before Illinois Republicans had used the issue to attack Democrats and unions in the state.

Chicago news station WGN reported that Republican gubernatorial candidate Gary Rabine said of Democratic Gov. JB Pritzker, "I believe JB is afraid of the consequences of maybe upsetting these unions for political reasons." Another Republican candidate, Darren Bailey, tweeted, "The out-of-control @CTULocal1 is still refusing to show up and do their job like every other teacher in the state is already doing. That means approximately 300,000 children in Chicago Public Schools will fall further behind." Republicans, however, are falsely painting the Chicago closures as representative of the larger school disruption issue.

When asked about the Chicago closures, White House press secretary Jen Psaki was clear on the administration's stance: "We want to see schools open," she said Monday. "The mental health impact on kids of not having schools open is very harsh and hard."

With the passage of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 in March, the Biden administration invested billions of dollars in keeping schools open. The act narrowly passed over universal Republican opposition.

The plan created the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, where states could access \$122 billion in funds to bolster HVAC facilities, get school employees vaccinated, expand school staffing, help students recoup learning losses, and support their mental health needs.

It also earmarked \$10 billion for expanded testing in schools to try to prevent the exact types of closures occurring now and established a clearinghouse of information on best practices for safely reopening schools.

At the beginning of his presidency, Biden committed to reopening a majority of the nation's schools for in-person instruction in his term's first 100 days. He reached that goal in May of last year, while committing his administration to greater efforts to deal with the pandemic's effect on schools.

"At the national and local level, we must act with urgency and bring every resource to bear to get more schools reopened full-time this spring and address the inequities that continue to persist in our classrooms and communities," Biden's Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona said in May 2021.