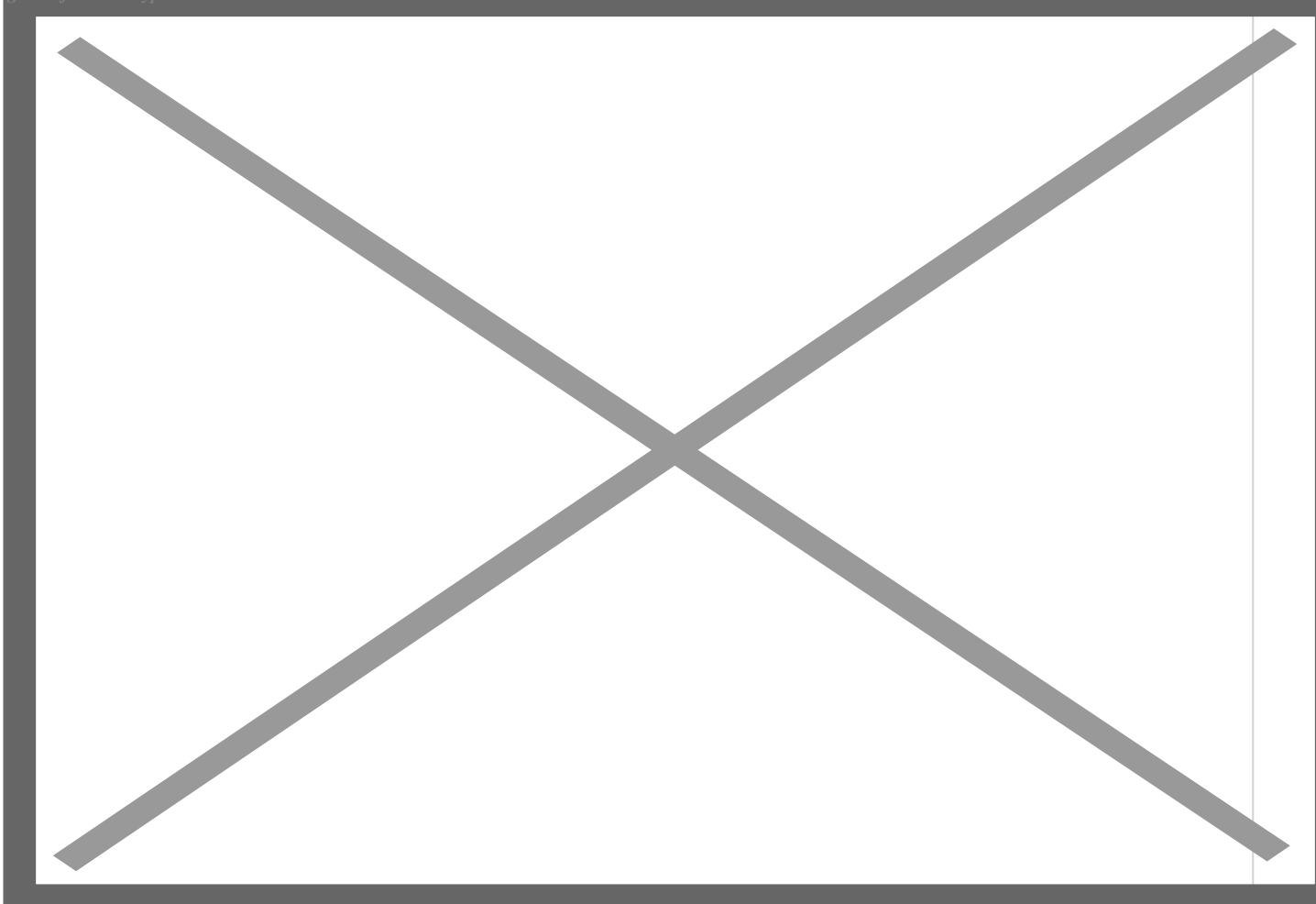


Schools in the U.S. delay reopening amid rapid spread of Omicron

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A female teacher sitting at a desk facing her laptop, Schools in Arizona reopened on Monday virtually, with teachers in front of computers in empty classrooms [Cheney Orr/Reuters]

New York, January 4 (RHC)-- Amid the Omicron variant pushing coronavirus infections to record-high levels in the United States, thousands of schools -- including in some major cities -- have delayed

scheduled return to classrooms following the holiday break or switched to remote learning.

The sheer number of cases has alarmed health officials with hospital systems in many states already strained. Maryland, Ohio, Delaware and Washington, DC, are all at or near record COVID-19 hospitalisation rates.

Dr Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious diseases expert, said the US has been seeing almost a "vertical increase" of new cases, now averaging 400,000 cases a day, with hospitalizations also up. "We are definitely in the middle of a very severe surge and uptick in cases," he said on Monday. "The acceleration of cases that we've seen is really unprecedented, gone well beyond anything we've seen before."

The developments come as the Omicron variant appears to be far more contagious than previous iterations, but may be less virulent than Delta. And the latest school disruptions, left many parents scrambling to find child care – adding to a broadening sense of chaos in the first few days of 2022.

"There's a lot of COVID out there ... it's going to be a bumpy start," said Michelle Smith McDonald, director of communications and public affairs for the Alameda County Office of Education.

In New Jersey, which has seen some of the highest case rates of any state in recent weeks, most urban districts have implemented virtual classes to start the new year, including Newark, which has nearly 38,000 students.

In the state of Wisconsin, Milwaukee's public school system announced on Sunday that its more than 70,000 students would switch to virtual learning on Tuesday due to a rise in COVID infections among staff members. In Ohio, Cleveland's schools have also gone remote, while Detroit, Michigan cancelled classes through Wednesday.

Some school systems are using testing to try to stave off further delays. In Washington, DC, all staff and 51,000 public school students must upload a negative test result to the district's website before coming to class on Wednesday. Parents can pick up rapid tests at their school or use their own.

Similar efforts are under way in California, which pledged to provide free home-test kits to all its six million K-12 public school students.

New York City schools, the largest district in the country, reopened as planned on Monday but with more testing for its nearly one million students. Instead of quarantining an entire classroom if one person tests positive, all students in the class will be given rapid at-home tests to use over the next seven days.

The full impact of the Omicron surge on the country's school districts may not be clear until next week. Already parents and administrators are struggling to implement changing guidance and figure out how many shots staff and older teenage students need to be considered fully vaccinated.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration on Monday authorised the use of a third dose of the Pfizer and BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine for children ages 12 to 15, and narrowed the time for all booster shots by a month to five months after the primary doses.



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