

U.S.

Schools May Be Open—But They’re Struggling

Omicron leaves some short of many things they need, from teachers to cafeteria workers

By [Ben Chapman](#) and [Scott Calvert](#) / Photographs by Andrew Seng for

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Schools should be open, pandemic or not, much of the public says. If only they all had what they need to function.

Students at New York City’s elite Brooklyn Technical High School played Hangman in psychology class recently while a substitute sat behind the teacher’s desk. They were eager to prepare for a coming midterm exam, the students said, but their usual instructor was out sick again.

“Everybody’s kind of freaking out,” said Delia Marcus, 17. “We haven’t really learned anything.”

The fast-spreading Omicron variant of Covid-19 has dealt a fresh pandemic blow to Brooklyn Tech, one of the nation’s largest high schools, with more than 5,800 students, and among the most competitive, with an admission rate under 10%.

The problem there and in many other schools boils down to a mismatch between demand and supply. While many officials and parents nationwide push to keep kids in school and away from remote learning, Omicron has left many schools short of the essentials needed to operate, like teachers, substitutes, bus drivers, cafeteria workers—and sometimes students themselves.

At Brooklyn Tech, empty desks dot classrooms, and roughly 10% of teachers are absent, according to the head of the school’s chapter of a teachers union. Teachers say they struggle to teach in classrooms while also delivering remote lessons to students who can’t attend because they tested positive or were near someone who did. Safety measures, such as providing good ventilation in the century-old school’s nine-story stone building, are a constant challenge.

The result is a sort of low-grade chaos. Teachers improvise Zoom classes for those who are absent. Some students try to teach others who have missed long stretches. Students give themselves Covid tests in crowded hallways.



Brooklyn Tech senior Samuel Haffenberg, with the school's prewar building in the background. His engineering studies entail hands-on lessons that can't be delivered online, he said.

Exhausted teachers, having lost their planning periods while covering for others, say they lack uniform practices on matters ranging from how far windows should be opened to which absences count as excused.

"It's kind of like the Wild West," said Adam Stevens, who teaches civics and economics at Brooklyn Tech.

Omicron has triggered record-breaking surges in Covid-19 cases and hospitalizations in the nearly two months since the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention confirmed

the first U.S. case. Deaths, a lagging indicator, are heading higher, too.

There are signs the variant's grip is easing, including in hard-hit New York City. The seven-day average of total people hospitalized nationwide with Covid-19 fell for a second straight day Saturday, reaching 158,788, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. U.S. hospitals were also seeing fewer new admissions.

Infections are still keeping millions of workers home sick or caring for family members with the illness. Some states have yet to see the worst of the Omicron spike, suggesting the variant's impact may persist even as cases fall elsewhere.

When Omicron hit schools in December, school administrators, along with many elected officials, parents and students, continued to push for in-person learning. The consensus was that the remote instruction resorted to earlier had failed many children academically and psychologically.

In New York, Mayor Eric Adams insists schools stay open. He has called remote instruction terrible for poorer communities and said schools can provide food, emotional support and supervision for students. Teachers and policymakers nationwide have said students have fallen behind in their studies and social development with remote learning.

Though thousands are again resorting temporarily to remote teaching, the vast majority of the country's nearly 100,000 public schools remain open, though in some cases just barely. Their struggles to operate effectively are fueling fresh concerns that, even in school, students are falling further behind in their education.

Teachers unions in some areas have called for a temporary pivot away from in-person instruction for the safety of staff and students. In Chicago this month, five days of classes were canceled when the union refused to send teachers into schools, and the school district balked at going virtual. Some schools in Oakland, Calif., have closed when teachers protested by staying home.

In Boston and New York, students have staged walkouts to oppose what they called lax safety protocols and unhealthy school conditions, as well as the absence of a remote-learning option. About 200 students at Redondo Union High School in Redondo Beach, Calif., held a brief demonstration, with some students saying that rules to keep them safe from the pandemic were too lax.

Anthony Bridi, principal of Redondo Union, said he hears competing messages: "Some are saying the guidelines are too strict, some are saying the guidelines are too lenient. It's

almost a Catch-22. You do one thing for one, then you get heat from the other.”



Cars wrapped around Redondo Union High School in Redondo Beach, Calif., on Jan. 6 as people picked up Covid-19 test kits provided to students.

PHOTO: JAY L. CLENDENIN/LOS ANGELES TIMES/GETTY IMAGES

Omicron this month pushed Covid-19 hospital admissions among children to record levels in the U.S. Doctors say this is probably mostly a result of the variant’s infectiousness rather than increased severity. Throughout the pandemic, children have been far less likely than adults to suffer severe illness from Covid-19, and doctors say this appears to be true for Omicron as well.

To help with the school staffing crunch, several states have recently relaxed hiring rules. In California, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed an order aimed at making it easier for districts to hire qualified short-term substitute teachers. The Kansas State Board of Education temporarily eased requirements for getting an emergency substitute license.

The Biden administration has said it will send schools 10 million coronavirus tests a month, more than doubling the volume of school-based testing from November levels. That should help schools with “test-to-stay,” a strategy that lets students remain in class after a Covid-19 exposure if they test negative at least twice over the following week and wear masks, the White House said.

Brooklyn Tech students described daily routines disrupted and dominated by the pandemic, although they expressed little fear of contracting Omicron, which they viewed as relatively mild. Some said that more than a third of their classes were staffed by substitutes at any time and that often a quarter of their classmates were out sick.

“It makes you not want to be there,” Ms. Marcus said.

When classmates of senior Madeleine Kimberling didn't comprehend lessons posted online in a law class, the 17-year-old said, she met with them in a video call to teach them about the Fourth and Eighth Amendments.



Madeleine Kimberling said she has sometimes helped other students with a law class by video call.

"I don't want to do that, because I don't really understand what's going on," she said.

Ms. Kimberling said that even though students generally aren't concerned about catching the virus, they worry about spreading it. "People have grandparents who could die from this. I don't want to get it and give it to my family," she said. "I don't want other people to get it and give it to people that they care about."

She said that in hallways, she has seen coughing students pull their mask down to take a Covid-19 test. "If you think you have Covid, I do not want you anywhere near me," she said.

To improve ventilation in their stuffy, prewar building, Brooklyn Tech teachers have been instructed to open windows at least 3 inches. Under city rules, two to three windows in a classroom should be open 3 inches or one window in a room should be open 6 inches.

When temperatures fell to 17 degrees this month, students took to wearing coats in an anthropology class. "It's like you lose focus," said senior Alex Attack, 17. "I swear to God, my toes went numb last week. It was so cold."



Alex Attack described cold classrooms and distracted students.

When teachers declare a free period rather than present new material, students do everything and anything except schoolwork, Mr. Attack said. Some have brought chessboards to school.

When substitute teachers are in charge, he added, some students leave class.

“Half the kids are out in the bathroom,” he said. “Bathroom meaning, like, wandering the hallway.”

For teachers, student absenteeism “sometimes makes you want to maybe slow down a little bit, because you have a sizable chunk of students at home,” said physics teacher Thomas Duncan, who leads the school’s United Federation of Teachers chapter.

Mr. Duncan said Brooklyn Tech lacks the ability to track and trace students who test positive because so many of them do. “We’re talking about hundreds of kids who are

testing positive,” he said. “You need a whole actual dedicated office for this.”

Brooklyn Tech senior Akash Hari said the challenges created by the virus make it difficult to thrive in class while applying to college. He said his entire family caught Covid just as applications were due at the end of last year.

“The hardest part was caring for other family members who were sick,” said Mr. Hari, who described his symptoms as relatively mild, though he was bedridden for three days.

Padma Hari, his mother, said high-school students should have a remote option with teachers live-streaming instruction in real time. She said she worries less about the virus at this point than the quality of in-person schooling.

“I’m comfortable with him going to school,” she said. “My question is: What value is it adding?...Is he really getting a better education by going to school when half of the teachers are not there? Probably not.”



Senior Akash Hari said his family caught Covid-19 just when college applications were due. His mother called for better remote-instruction options.

If there were a robust remote option, she said, “you can hold him accountable for the work he’s supposed to submit and learn.”

Hundreds of students at Brooklyn Tech protested on Jan. 11 in favor of live remote instruction.

Mr. Duncan, the physics teacher, agreed there is a need for some kind of remote option. But as for live-streaming from an in-person class, “it’s very challenging to do both of those things at the same time,” Mr. Duncan said. “And at this point, staff are absolutely exhausted.”

New York City Education Department officials have said staffing issues present an obstacle to live remote instruction, and this isn’t currently offered by public schools in the

city. The department said on Jan. 14 it would make online lessons available to all students, including those who were sick and quarantined or who failed the health screen.

Brooklyn Tech's principal referred questions about the school to the city Education Department. The department said in a written statement that it faces challenges bringing students back to school, but officials are seeing the situation stabilize.



New York City students staged a walkout on Jan. 11 protesting the lack of extensive options for remote learning.

PHOTO: MICHAAL NIGRO/PACIFIC PRESS/ZUMA PRESS

The city has 24,000 qualified substitute teachers and aides to assist with staffing gaps, said Nathaniel Styer, a spokesman for the department. He said all school buildings have working ventilation backed up by two air purifiers. "Our schools are the safest places for young people to be," Mr. Styer said.

The citywide attendance rate at public schools was above 91% before the pandemic. On Friday, it was 81%, although Brooklyn Tech's rate rose to 89% that day, according to the Education Department.

The number of students and staff members reporting new positive Covid-19 test results to New York City public schools fell to 2,157 on Jan. 21 from 11,824 on Jan 10, the department said.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

How are schools in your area handling staff shortages? Join the conversation below.

Brooklyn Tech senior Samuel Haffenberg, 17, said many of the lessons in his civil engineering major require hands-on learning that can't be delivered online. "A lot of assignments are using expensive, large equipment that I can only access through the school," he said.

Peter Haffenberg, his father, said this is just the latest turmoil these students have had to endure since the pandemic hit during their sophomore year.

"You could argue they are rolling with the punches like you've got to do through life, making course corrections and changes to get things done as stuff comes," he said. "It's an education of another type."

Write to Ben Chapman at Ben.Chapman@wsj.com and Scott Calvert at scott.calvert@wsj.com

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