

Delayed and unplanned school closures in the US have increased coronavirus transmission

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The rapid, exponential growth of the coronavirus pandemic has sent shockwaves throughout the world, and its impact on K-12 schools has been immense worldwide. As of this writing, 39 countries have shut down all of their public schools, affecting 421 million students and tens of millions more teachers and education workers worldwide.

In the US, the process of closing schools has been haphazard and coordinated entirely at the state and local levels, with no national plans put in place by the Trump administration. At this point, at least 46,000 schools have been closed across 20 states, impacting at least 26 million students or nearly half the total K-12 student population. Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Washington, Louisiana, Florida, Wisconsin, Illinois, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Virginia and the District of Columbia have closed all of their schools, with more statewide closures expected to be announced over the weekend.

Coinciding with the announcement of their statewide school closures Thursday, Ohio Department of Health Director Amy Acton stated, “At the very least, one percent of our population is carrying this virus in Ohio today ... over 100,000 people.” Notably, Ohio has one of the lower number of cases in the country, with 13 confirmed as of this writing. By comparison, two of the three states with the highest confirmed number of cases, New York with 421 and California with 282, have only closed certain districts or individual schools when confirmed cases have arisen.

The drastic measures undertaken across the US and internationally are belated and disorganized, underscoring the irrational and unplanned character of capitalism. In the US, as late as Monday only 0.4 percent of all schools were closed, despite multiple weeks having passed since the coronavirus began to spread across the country. Further, the closures have been done without any nationwide plan to provide meals and other services for the most disadvantaged students, with districts left to develop such plans on their own. An estimated 20.2 million students depend upon free school lunches, 11.77 million students depend upon free

breakfasts and 2.5 million homeless children rely upon schools as places of shelter.

Most school districts have provided little to no guidance to teachers and students, having been given no guidance from state and federal authorities. Over the past week, numerous articles have appeared in the press questioning the closure of schools in places like Italy, China and other countries that have heeded the World Health Organization’s calls for urgent containment of the pandemic.

For over a month, many school districts and politicians around the country have told communities and schools that the risks of transmission are low, while giving relatively basic flu and sickness advice such as, “stay home when sick,” “wash hands frequently” and “enhance cleaning.” In general, districts have only recommended any type of school closure when there is one student, teacher or staff member that tests positive for COVID-19.

In this regard, it is important to point out that the United States has done extremely limited testing of the population for the virus thus far, with less than 10,000 people tested as of Friday evening, while many people have been denied the coronavirus test. Comparatively, Italy has tested around 50,000 people; in the province of Guangdong, China 320,000 people were tested by February 28; and nearly 190,000 people were tested in South Korea as of March 8.

Although most serious effects of the illness from the coronavirus affect older individuals and those with preexisting conditions, not children, the fact that younger children show fewer symptoms could make them more effective carriers that have been spreading the disease widely without getting tested. With youth showing fewer symptoms and districts in the US waiting on a “positive test” to call a school cancellation, it is entirely possible that millions have been exposed to the coronavirus due to a lack of comprehensive testing and inaction.

Adults that have been forced to work in crowded schools and universities include over 10 million teachers, professors, janitors, psychologists, administrative staff, librarians, coaches and special education staff. Many school employees

are at increased risk of complications from the virus due to their age or underlying conditions.

The lack of planning and coordination of testing, preparing healthcare facilities and creating nationwide protocols for thousands of schools, workplaces and other institutions has set the stage for problems to be compounded in the United States. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, will be impacted by avoidable illness and death.

The Socialist Equality Party urges teachers to build rank-and-file action committees to link up with workers in other industries, to develop a coordinated and systematic program to close all schools, contain the spread of the virus and continue to provide the population with adequate food, shelter and safety from the risk of infection. School and employment closings and other changes to life during the pandemic need to be accompanied by a broad-based program to expand essential services to all students, workers and families.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Rogelio, a history teacher in the Sweetwater Union High School District in California, about the impact of coronavirus on his district and the inaction by local officials. In Sweetwater, teachers and students have begun to fight back against budget cuts, mass layoffs and the closure of vital student support centers announced in recent months. It was announced Friday that all schools in the district, and across San Diego County, would close starting Monday.

Rogelio said, “I have a feeling it is developing faster than the US is prepared to deal with. If you ask me, I think the reported numbers are conservative. They don’t want people to know how bad it actually is, they’re worried about losing money.”

He commented on the lack of preparedness in Sweetwater, saying, “The district should be preparing teachers, for example, with online learning. Yesterday our department received an email from the history curriculum specialist saying we should start preparing for online platforms, and it was immediately shut down by the district saying, ‘No, don’t listen to that. We haven’t made any final decisions.’ Instead of learning from teachers and being more proactive and figuring out what we should do to lower the risk, the district has been waiting until the last minute.”

Another teacher in Sweetwater, who wished to remain anonymous, stated, “I don’t think the district is doing anything right lately, but given the extent of the virus around the world, schools should close. They say it’s not killing many people, but if we can lower the risk and save a few people that would possibly die from this, then we should!”

This teacher also noted the growing importance of social media in this crisis, saying, “As much as I don’t like social media, when it comes to this that is going to be my go-to for

information. Social media will tell you what and where it is.”

Regarding sick pay for education workers, she said, “If they are going to call this place a hazard zone because of the virus, then we should get hazard pay. If we have to be home because of this crisis, that’s not our fault. That should be across the board. We should all be getting paid even if we are not physically here in the schools. The government should help those of us who live check to check, like myself, to get through this.”

Another teacher in New York City spoke with the WSWS and wished to remain anonymous. Despite being an epicenter of the coronavirus in the US with 154 confirmed cases, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio has refused to close the school district, feigning sympathy for the roughly 114,000 homeless children that live in the city, for whom he has done next to nothing to provide shelter since he was elected mayor in 2014.

The teacher told the WSWS, “There have been no teacher meetings about the coronavirus. There is almost no collaboration within the three schools in our building. A teacher heard loosely that a child at one of the schools in this building showed up whose parents found out that he had been in contact with someone who contracted coronavirus. The student has not even been tested to see if he has coronavirus.

“Bill de Blasio does not give two craps about teachers. He says they do not want group meetings, but teachers hold five meetings, classes, that is, daily. The mayor is saying we must do something about the economy so we don’t become like Italy. But what’s happening there is because they did not lock it down when they could have. I think the schools should close. There has been no criticism of the mayor from UFT [United Federation Teachers] President Michael Mulgrew, so I think he is in accord with him.

“This whole crisis exposes how antilabor they are in this country. They have contempt for labor.”



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