

New York City education department, backed by teachers union, downplayed virus threat

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An exposé based on internal emails from New York City’s Department of Education (DOE) obtained by the online journal *The City* demonstrates that the DOE, a part of the city government headed by Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio, made a major effort to conceal the scope of possible COVID-19 cases among staff and students.

Included in the findings were the fact that the DOE did not allow students with suspected cases of COVID-19 to be logged into an Online Occurrence reporting system unless they had been tested, at a time when testing was nearly impossible to obtain. When one teacher asked the principal at Brooklyn Tech, the largest high school in the city with 6,000 students and 350 staffers, if a student showing symptoms of COVID-19 should be logged, the principal responded, “The DOE only is having us log cases of positive tests.”

Also, at Brooklyn Tech, after some students returned from visiting Wuhan, China, a hotspot of the pandemic, in February, staff and students began to get sick. One teacher told his colleagues that he was afraid he had contracted the virus.

But as late as March 15, the day de Blasio finally closed the schools, Brooklyn Tech’s principal issued a statement to parents and staff saying, “At this time, no member of our student body or school staff has a confirmed case of coronavirus.”

The principal went so far as to say, “Since it is cold and flu season, the NYC Department of Health also advises that we should not interpret any illness or absence from work or school for any amount of time as a novel coronavirus related absence or illness.”

A spokesperson for the DOE told *The City* that the principal was only following the protocol set by the department. *The City* reports: “Then another teacher with whom this teacher shared a classroom called out sick and was feared to be COVID-19 positive.

“‘They weren’t telling anyone,’ the teacher recalled. ‘As the week went on, we had fewer and fewer kids’ showing up.’”

One teacher at another Brooklyn school who returned from Italy in February developed a fever and sought testing for the coronavirus but was denied because Italy at the time was not regarded as a hotspot.

Notoriously, on March 10, the DOE issued a statement

saying, “At the moment, there is no reason for any school to call [the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene: DOHMH] to report potential or confirmed cases. DOHMH is receiving information ... about positive test results strictly from laboratories.”

The memo goes on to specifically sanction “large gatherings” at school events. The next day Seattle closed its public schools and the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus outbreak to be a pandemic. The issuing of the letter is now under investigation by city agencies.

It has since emerged that the substance of the memo was in line with the efforts by the de Blasio administration to sideline DOHMH in public messaging about the virus and to block systematic testing for the coronavirus by the department at hospitals in early March.

Some of the most damning evidence reported in the exposé concerns the actions of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). At a time when de Blasio was telling New Yorkers to “Go on with your lives + get out on the town despite Coronavirus,” the UFT president, Michael Mulgrew, advised the de Blasio administration by March 7 to shut down the schools, indicating that Mulgrew was aware of the dangers to teachers and students. The union, however, did not inform its nearly 200,000 members in the city.

On March 12, Mulgrew met with de Blasio, after which he issued a communique in which he said that the two men had “decided to respectfully disagree” on school closings. This was after districts in Kentucky, Los Angeles, Maryland, Michigan, Ohio, Oregon, Washington, and West Virginia had closed.

In a statement to *The City* last week, Mulgrew said, “We cannot know how differently the pandemic would have played out if schools and other public facilities had been closed earlier than they were.”

In fact, Mulgrew understood the dangers of keeping the school system open but was opposed to any action by teachers, school employees and other city workers to demand the closure of the schools to protect workers, the city’s 1.1 million public school students and their families. Instead, Mulgrew did everything to shore up the Democratic Party political establishment and prevent the outbreak of mass opposition to its criminally indifferent response.

The most significant social factor in the closing of schools was the groundswell of threats of a sickout and calls for a strike on social media by teachers. It was only then that de Blasio was forced to close schools on March 15. Even then, teachers were required to show up for three days of training in school buildings for online teaching.

On March 2, New York's Democratic governor, Andrew Cuomo also downplayed the danger of the contagion. "So, when you're saying, what happened in other countries versus what happened here, we don't even think it's going to be as bad as it was in other countries." This marks him, along with de Blasio, the Department of Education and the UFT as criminal in its late closing of the schools.

New York City's public schools were not the only probable vector of transmission of the virus throughout the city. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), controlled by Cuomo, refused to allow transit workers operating busses and subways to wear personal protective equipment for weeks, then supplied it to workers only in inadequate quantities, and never implemented serious social distancing measures. These failures have not only caused the deaths of over 100 transit workers but also undoubtedly spread the virus throughout the city. The Transport Workers Union, like the UFT, has at every step backed management and the city and state authorities.

The Democratic Party and its trade union wing worked on behalf of Wall Street to keep the city and state open as long as possible by dismissing the severity of the threat of the virus and by negligence and outright lying. Like the Trump administration, the Democrats were primarily concerned with preventing a massive selloff on the New York Stock Exchange. Their delay led to the deaths of thousands of workers in New York City and the state.

The extent of the crime can be perhaps judged by the recent epidemiological study by Nathan Grubaugh of the Yale School of Public Health, which was cited in the *New York Times* on May 7. Drawing from the tracking of mutations of the virus as well as the travel patterns of people known to be infected, its model suggests that most of the coronavirus infections in the United States spread from New York City.

To date, over 27,000 people have died of COVID-19-related illnesses in New York state, 20,000 of them in the city alone, although the real figure is likely much higher. At least 74 educators have died of COVID-19 since March 16. In one egregious case, a 30-year old Brooklyn middle-school teacher, Rana Zoe Mungin, died of complications from the disease on April 27 after she was twice refused tests for the virus at a Brooklyn hospital. *The City's* exposure was published on the same day that the New York mayor announced that he was planning on reopening schools in September and suggested that some nonessential businesses may open in June. Governor Cuomo also announced preparations to open three upstate regions in New York this weekend to allow some construction, manufacturing and retail to resume.

As they begin to open the state, the measures that the Democrats in New York have taken to ensure that the population is safe from a new spike of the pandemic are entirely inadequate. The number of tests remains low and contact tracers are few.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has observed, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)'s "A Plan to Safely Reopen America's Schools and Communities" issued last month is entirely in line with the demands of Wall Street and the Trump administration to reopen business.

We noted, "While the unions rhetorically 'scream' and 'put things on the table,' they are, in reality, plotting with federal and state administrations to force educators back to school no matter how unsafe. The AFT and NEA will not lift a finger to defend teachers and students, much less the population as a whole, in the face of the ruling class' homicidal policy."

This is the significance of Michael Mulgrew's presence on de Blasio's Education Sector Advisory Council for reopening the schools. His role is to attempt to persuade educators into accepting school openings that they know are dangerous. This is because getting students back into the classrooms, despite the dangers of newly discovered complications from COVID-19, is central to getting their parents back to work.

The recent exposures of the conduct of New York City's Department of Education demonstrates that educators, students and the entire population are no safer from the ravages of the pandemic under the Democrats than under the Republicans. A political fight must be taken up by educators to ensure that schools remain closed until the pandemic has been contained.

Educators should immediately begin to form rank-and file safety committees that will demand that the schools remain closed until adequate social distancing measures, contract tracing and testing are implemented. These must be combined with launching a political counteroffensive against both big-business parties and the development of a socialist movement of the working class aimed at redistributing society's wealth to meet human needs, not private profit.



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