

White House declares that “science should not stand in the way” of reopening schools

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At a press conference Thursday, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany reiterated the Trump administration’s mandate that schools resume full in-person instruction in the fall, crudely expressing the anti-scientific outlook that guides the ruling class response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The president has said unmistakably that he wants schools to open,” McEnany declared, adding, “and when he says open he means open and full. Kids being able to attend, each and every day, at their school. The science should not stand in the way of this.”

These statements were made as the pandemic spirals out of control across the US. On Thursday, another 73,331 people tested positive for the virus, a new daily record for the country, while 962 people died. Over the past week a total of 470,056 people became infected and 5,326 died.

The drive to reopen schools is a crucial component of the broader “return to work” campaign of class war against the working class, which has already produced mass infections and deaths to achieve “herd immunity.” The principles of public health and science, which are in alignment with the social interests of the working class, stand diametrically opposed to the insatiable need for profit of the financial oligarchy.

There is no safe method for resuming in-person instruction in dilapidated schools that have been systematically defunded for decades. In fact, there is a growing body of proof that school districts across the US are fully aware of the lethal risk posed to educators and students by the resumption of in-person instruction.

On Tuesday, it was revealed that Hazelwood School District in Missouri is mandating that parents sign a waiver of liability relinquishing their rights to hold the district responsible if their child becomes infected and dies from COVID-19. The waiver is meant for students participating in sports and other special activities, and exempts the district and any of its employees, even if the infection is found to be “caused by the negligence or carelessness of the Releasees.”

Last week, the Canyons School District in Utah briefly had

a list of “Crisis Communications” on its website, which has since been removed. Among the communications being planned was a “Template letter for the death of a student, teacher.”

In Tampa Bay, Florida, a law firm has begun providing free living wills to teachers forced to return to schools after the Florida Department of Education issued an emergency order requiring school districts to reopen all “brick and mortar schools at least five days per week for all students.”

Attorney Charles Gallagher told Fox40 local news that he decided to offer these services after hearing of the tragic death of Arizona teacher Kimberley Chavez Lopez Byrd, who along with two co-teachers contracted COVID-19 while sharing a room for summer school. Regarding the dangers teachers face, Gallagher stated, “It’s not physically possible, with the room they have logistically, to distance and it’s not physically possible for them to be apart from other teachers, other kids.”

While the Trump administration continues to justify its demand that schools reopen by claiming that children do not transmit the virus, all evidence points to the contrary. Earlier this week, it was revealed that one-third of children tested in Florida were positive. Around the world, countries that have reopened schools in places with community transmission have had to quickly shut them down following outbreaks of infections.

In Israel, health ministry officials have attributed the major spike in COVID-19 cases in that country to the unfettered reopening of schools in early May. At least 1,335 students and 691 staff have been infected, and government figures indicate that in June the second-highest known place of infection outside people’s own communities was schools.

A Christian summer camp in Missouri, which adopted a 31-point plan to try to prevent any infections, nevertheless saw more than 80 campers, counselors and staff test positive. Similarly, a pair of YMCA summer camps in Georgia left at least 30 camp attendees infected with the virus.

In response to the homicidal policy of reopening schools, educators are once again becoming radicalized and striving

to unify across districts and states.

The hashtags #NotMyChild, #KeepSchoolsClosed and #notmykid began trending on Twitter following McEnany's press conference. The Facebook group "Texas Teachers United Against Reopening Schools" continues to expand, with over 10,300 members and roughly 100 posts per day. A Facebook-organized "Rally for Safe School Opening" in Austin, Texas, scheduled to take place Saturday, lists over 1,000 planning to attend with another 9,200 interested in attending.

Responding to this growing pressure from educators and parents, on Wednesday Houston Independent School District Superintendent Grenita Lathan announced that the first six weeks of the school year, which begins September 8, will be fully online.

Dylan Lomangino, an elementary orchestra teacher in East Hartford, Connecticut, told the WSWS, "I've been talking to other teachers at my school and it's an atmosphere of complete uncertainty at all levels." He added, "We need to get rid of the idea of putting everyone back to school in the fall, it's not feasible."

Describing the horrible conditions in some school districts throughout the state, Dylan noted, "Windows in inner cities are often shut permanently. A lot of the school buildings are already 'sick' with mold or asbestos that aren't rectified, and we go back in late August when it's really hot and filled with mold or other airborne pathogens because districts haven't been able to deal with things, and now it's coupled with wearing masks which will make learning impossible."

Dylan expressed agreement with the need for a nationwide strike against reopening schools, stating, "I realize we have to fight against capitalist interests."

In opposition to the interests of educators, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA)—the two national teacher unions that oversee the various state and local teacher unions—are fully complicit in the criminal plans by the ruling elite to reopen schools.

The NEA's Representative Assembly on July 2-3 focused primarily on promoting the campaign of Democrat Joe Biden and lobbying for the passage of HEROES in the Senate. As to the safety of educators, the NEA is officially calling for "distancing, deterrence, disinfection, and detection" and urging older teachers to ask for "accommodations" like "additional PPE or ?additional cleaning of surfaces?", or accommodations that involve changes in the classroom." In other words, they are fully on board with the homicidal demands for a return to school. In fact, in their recommendations they cite a Pennsylvania study which predicts that without "distancing and hybrid schedules," which most schools will find difficult if not

impossible, "the average school in the state would have five infections within five days of opening."

NEA President Lily Eskelsen García recently stated, "The American economy cannot recover if schools can't reopen." García has worked closely with the American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten to try and channel teacher opposition into support for Joseph Biden and the Democrats in the coming election.

The truth is the Democrats have no more solution to the pandemic than Trump. In no region, from Democratic-controlled California to the Republican-held Deep South, was the time bought by social distancing used to prepare the necessary health care infrastructure to contain the pandemic. Now, under conditions far more dangerous than when schools were closed in March, as districts across the country face a total \$230 billion shortfall, teachers are being told to risk their lives to cover over the politicians' malign neglect.

Under conditions of unchecked community spread, schools cannot operate in person without sharpening the crisis. In order to safely resume in-person instruction, the pandemic must first be brought under control, followed by a massive investment in education. To make up for lost time and prevent further outbreaks, class sizes should be halved, facilities renovated, nurses hired for each school, and free universal testing be provided to detect asymptomatic carriers among students.

In the coming weeks, the dire crisis facing educators will greatly intensify as the semester starting date approaches for school districts and budget cuts are put into effect. In order to carry out a genuine struggle against the unsafe reopening of schools and the broader economy, educators and parents must form independent, rank-and-file safety committees to take control of the situation. These committees should establish connections across districts and states, to prepare for nationwide strike action.

Above all, educators must recognize that they are part of a broader movement of the working class, including autoworkers, logistics workers, meat packers and health care workers who are also resisting unsafe conditions. This fight must be guided by a socialist perspective directed against the capitalist system.



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