

# Hawaii officials push unsafe reopening of schools despite outcry by educators and parents

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The Hawaii Department of Education (HIDOE) and the Hawaii State Teachers Union (HSTA) recently agreed to a Memorandum of Understanding for reopening Hawaii public schools for the 2020–21 school year, which will place educators and students back in the classroom on August 4.

As of yesterday, reported cases in Hawaii have reached 1,334 cases and 23 deaths, with both figures on the rise in recent weeks due to lifted restrictions on activity throughout the islands. While reported cases have remained relatively low thus far due to travel restrictions from the mainland and internationally, the plan to reopen schools is set to take place roughly a month before travel restrictions are lifted in the state, which relies heavily on the tourism industry.

As cases have risen in Hawaii and astronomically across the US in recent weeks, the combined impact of these reopenings will greatly exacerbate the spread of the virus throughout the islands.

Economic impacts from the pandemic have reached unprecedented levels in the state, with 23 percent unemployment and a projected 49.2 percent decline in state general fund revenue from May 2019 to May 2020. Of note, 25 percent of the jobs lost have been in the tourism industry.

A high school special education teacher on the island of Hawaii (the Big Island), told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “My students come from families and for many of them who work in the tourism industry, I worry about when the state opens back up to tourists that they will be exposed and get sick, and possibly spread the virus to other students and teachers. They will probably go back to these jobs if tourism resumes. Prior to the shutdown, about 250,000 jobs were in the tourism and related sectors. Many students live with extended family, in

multigenerational households. This adds another layer of risk for spreading COVID because of crowded living conditions.”

The state of Hawaii is somewhat unique in that the HIDOE oversees all schools and there are no local school boards. HIDOE employs about 22,000 full-time employees, 13,000 of whom are educators, and there are nearly 285 public schools throughout the islands which serve about 180,000 students in grades K-12.

The reopening plan has been met with outrage by parents and educators. Thousands of Hawaii’s teachers, staff and parents submitted written testimony at a virtual board of directors meeting on July 9, denouncing the MOU, emphasizing the failure of HIDOE and HSTA to create a reopening plan that ensures the health and safety of educators, students, and their families.

During the board of directors meeting, HIDOE Superintendent Dr. Christina Kishimoto expressed the underlying economic motive behind the drive to resume in-person learning. She claimed to understand educators’ safety worries, but said, “My concern is the other health and safety matters we create when we can’t accommodate a high-need child or another risky situation; a child left alone in their home while a parent goes to work. And while that onus is not just on the school system, that’s the balance that we’re trying to consider here.” In other words, the schools need to provide daycare so that parents can return to work.

As opposition to the reopening plan has grown, many teachers and parents in Hawaii have turned to social media to express their views and begin to organize. The Facebook group, “Hawai’i for a Safe Return to School” was created on July 10 in response to the plan and has grown to over 2,800 members. The group’s page makes the argument that “the current state plan does not meet

CDC recommended standards, and is unsafe. It puts the lives of our community at great risk of death or permanent injury,” and the group call for the reversal of the current plan.

Lisa, a high school teacher on the Big Island, shared her concerns around reopening. “I didn’t sign up to put my life in jeopardy to teach children. Without us having a specific vaccine or cure for this, what are we being asked to do? Are you saying that our lives are expendable? Because once we open up the schools, we’ll open up to tourism and we’re going to be back at risk again for exposure.”

The reopening plan is a recipe for disaster, and is wholly inadequate for ensuring the health and safety of all educators, staff, and students. The MOU’s language around students and staff wearing face coverings on campus includes the phrase, “should wear face coverings...” and another equally weak provision to limit class size and large gatherings or groups “when possible.”

The plan stipulates classroom distances between 3 and 6 feet “may be allowed with approved contract exceptions and additional precautions such as mandatory face coverings” and that classroom teachers would “determine routines and rules related to wearing of face covering(s) in their particular classrooms.”

Under the reopening plan, individual schools are held responsible for implementing one of three “models” for reopening August 4: in-person learning every day, a blended rotation of in-person and online instruction, or a combination of the two.

A fully distance-learning framework for all students was not included as a model for instruction. However, as part of the plan, full virtual learning will be offered for families who choose to have their child fully online. This online instruction is provided by HIDOE, which contracts with a private company, Acellus Academy. In effect, HIDOE is working to gradually privatize public education by demanding that their public employees risk their lives by returning to schools, while siphoning funds to this private online academy.

Forcing the resumption of in-person instruction endangers thousands of Hawaii’s educators, 40 percent of whom are at high risk of dying if they contract the virus. The MOU includes the stipulation, “teachers who are documented to be at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19 *may* be provided options to limit their exposure risk (e.g., telework or modified job responsibilities).” However, teachers in the state are already being told telework is not an option, even with a

doctor’s authorization, as the decision is ultimately up to the principals who will weigh their decision based on their master schedules.

Another Hawaii secondary school teacher told the WSWs, “As someone in their late fifties with an underlying medical condition that was documented, I gave my principal a doctor’s letter certifying this. I can’t be teaching in person until it’s safe for me to go back. I’ll get a different job if I need to, working from home. Going into the classroom that’s already overheated in the high 80’s and 90’s in August and September, full of students who might be sick, is literally a threat to my life and it’s not worth it.”

The MOU encourages the implementation of sanitizing, quarantining and physical distancing on campuses and within classrooms, yet requires individual schools to shoulder the cost as well as the logistical burden of how they will provide these extra services. Hawaii’s Governor David Ige and state legislators are planning massive cuts to social services to offset the state’s budget shortfall of \$2.3 billion.

Not only do schools face major defunding in the upcoming year due to economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on the state, but the HIDOE has already issued mass layoffs to classified employees in recent months. In May alone, 2,600 HIDOE employees were laid off according to the latest Bureau of Labor Statistics report.

Neither the unions nor the Department of Education will provide any real safety for educators and students amid the deepening of the COVID-19 pandemic. The WSWs *Educators Newsletter* calls on Hawaii educators to build rank-and-file safety committees at every school site in opposition to the homicidal plan to reopen the classrooms and put forth demands that center the health of the workers and students themselves. Only through the independent mobilization of the working class can it be ensured that not a single educator, staff member or student perishes from the deadly virus.



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