

Drive to reopen US schools continues despite mounting evidence of deadly consequences

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The drive to reopen the schools continues across the US despite mounting evidence of the disastrous public health implications of doing so even as the coronavirus pandemic rages out of control.

New cases of COVID-19 and deaths from the disease continue to rise and no plan is in place to contain the spread of the virus. Under these conditions, it is impossible to reopen schools safely even with the most advanced measures to protect teachers and students, let alone the half-measures underfunded school districts are implementing.

Opposition to the reopening of the schools is growing in every part of the country, with social media exploding over the past month since President Trump tweeted that “SCHOOLS MUST OPEN IN THE FALL!!!” There are now over 55 Facebook groups in at least 30 states, with a combined membership of over 300,000 educators, parents and students. These social media groups have served as centers for the organization of car caravans and other forms of protest.

At least four schools in Indiana and Mississippi that resumed in-person instruction over the past week have already had a student test positive for COVID-19. Within hours of the start of the first school day at Greenfield Central Junior High School in Indiana, officials were notified that a student had tested positive, prompting them to isolate the student and order all those with whom the student had come into contact to self-quarantine.

There is an expanding body of scientific research showing the centrality of keeping schools closed as part of any plan to contain the pandemic. Last week, a study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (*JAMA*) concluded that the widespread closure of schools in mid-March saved at least 40,600 lives over a 16-day period and resulted in an estimated

1.37 million fewer infections over a 26-day period in the spring. Those states that closed earliest saw the largest relative reductions in infections and deaths.

Another *JAMA* study released last week found that babies and young children infected with COVID-19 can carry high viral loads in their throats and airways—up to 100 times the amount of adults. The study noted, “Behavioral habits of young children and close quarters in school and day care settings raise concern for SARS-CoV-2 amplification in this population as public health restrictions are eased.”

These findings were corroborated in a separate study from Trento, Italy, which found that children 14 years old and younger transmit the virus at over twice the rate of adults aged 30–49.

Researchers at the University of Texas at Austin recently released estimates on the number of children or staff likely to enter US schools already infected, based on current infection rates. Their research found that more than 80 percent of Americans live in a county where at least one person in a school of 500 students and staff would likely arrive infected.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has released a report on a major outbreak at a YMCA overnight summer camp in Georgia in late June, where 260 campers and staff members tested positive for COVID-19, or over 75 percent of those tested. Notably, the camp required all attendees to provide documentation that they had tested negative for the virus before arriving.

The demand that schools reopen is central to the ruling class campaign to force workers back to work in order to pump out profits for the corporate-financial elite. While the Trump administration has spearheaded this campaign, flouting medical science, the Democrats bear equal responsibility for prematurely reopening

businesses and demanding the reopening of schools in states they control, such as Rhode Island, Hawaii and Colorado.

Plans to reopen schools are left at the local level, with each of the country's over 13,000 school districts choosing independently and without statewide or regional coordination whether to fully resume in-person instruction, remain fully online, or adopt a hybrid model where students attend in person part of the week.

Of the 15 largest school districts in the US, 10 have announced that they will at least begin their school years fully online, largely as a result of pressure from parents and educators resisting plans to resume in-person instruction.

In Orange County, Florida, the ninth-largest school district in the US, with over 212,000 students, parents must choose either fully in-person or fully online instruction. For working class parents, many of whom have just seen their federal unemployment benefits eliminated, this "choice" amounts to economic blackmail. They are being compelled to return to work and send their children to school, regardless of their justified concern over the potential for both themselves and their children becoming infected.

According to a University of Texas at Austin study, a school of 1,000 students in Orange County can expect to have 14 students or staff arrive at school infected.

The largest and third-largest districts in the country—New York City and Chicago, both of which are run by the Democratic Party—have announced that they plan to partially reopen schools under the hybrid model. This will affect a combined 1.5 million students and nearly 100,000 teachers.

Given the overcrowded and dilapidated classrooms that exist in these districts, such plans spell disaster for the working class in both cities. Similar plans are proposed by the Hawaii Department of Education, the 13th largest school district, where classes are scheduled to resume on August 17 for over 185,000 students.

The Socialist Equality Party and the WSW *Educators Newsletter* have issued the call for educators, parents and students to form independent rank-and-file safety committees to unite across district and state lines and prepare for a nationwide strike to halt the drive to reopen the schools.

We propose that these committees fight for a vast expansion in public education funding, as states face

combined budget shortfalls of at least \$300 billion. They must establish deep connections with all sections of the working class, including autoworkers, who are forming their own rank-and-file safety committees across the Midwest.

This network of rank-and-file committees must be completely independent of the unions and both the Republican and Democratic parties. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) are subservient to the Democratic Party and have ruled out mobilizing their millions of members in a nationwide strike to oppose the reopening of the schools. Instead, they will work to isolate any struggles that break out, as they have with every teachers' strike since 2018.

The ruling elites internationally, from Brazil to Germany, to **Scotland** and Australia, are demanding that the schools reopen under unsafe conditions because they are all seeking to force workers back onto the job in order to drive up corporate profits and make workers pay for the trillions being squandered to bail out the banks.

The response of educators, parents and students must therefore be international, fighting to link their struggles across borders in a global counteroffensive against the capitalist system.

The establishment of a network of independent rank-and-file committees in schools and neighborhoods will become a powerful means through which the working class can prosecute its struggle in defense of public health, public education, democratic rights and the social needs of the people in opposition to the limitless greed of the financial oligarchy. We urge all those who wish to form such committees and advance this struggle to contact us today.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact