

# US teachers defy threats to cut funding for schools that delay in-person learning

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Facing popular outrage over the reckless rush to reopen schools, several large districts, including Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Houston and Miami-Dade, Florida, have been forced to start the school year with online learning only. As of July 29, *Education Week* reported, 20 of the 29 school districts with more than 100,000 students will reopen with remote learning only.

Four of the largest districts, however, including New York City (1.1 million students), Chicago (360,000 students), Hawaii (181,000 students) and Duval County, Florida (130,000 students), will require teachers and students to attend school for at least part of the week under a so-called “hybrid/partial” model, which also includes some remote learning.

Five large districts, *Education Week* reported, will hold a full in-person reopening available for all students. These include three in Florida—Hillsborough County (220,000), Polk County (101,000), Pinellas County (101,000)—and two in Texas—Dallas (155,000) and Cypress-Fairbanks (116,500).

Millions of students are being sent back to school in medium and smaller districts across the US, even though the numbers of COVID-19 cases are higher in many states across the country than they were when schools were forced to close in mid-March. While politicians from both parties profess concern about the academic and psychological impact of keeping schools closed, their chief concern is getting children out of their homes so their parents can be forced back into factories, warehouses and other workplaces to resume making profits.

Over the next week, several districts in Tennessee, Arizona, California, Florida, Nebraska, Mississippi and Utah will open with full in-person learning. At least nine cases have already been confirmed in Indiana’s schools, which opened last week, and in Gwinnett County Public Schools, the largest district in Georgia, 260 school workers have been quarantined after testing positive or being exposed to someone who had.

Protests against the unsafe openings continue to spread

across the country. On Tuesday, teachers in Granite School District in Salt Lake City, Utah protested. Around 67,000 students are scheduled to return on August 24 for full in-school learning. About 100 teachers and parents in Columbia, Missouri also protested outside of the school board meeting Tuesday night in an event promoted on Facebook called “Not until it’s safe.”

Summing up the opposition by teachers, Mike, a high school teacher in central Michigan told WSW, “The reason why they are giving each district their individual choice when and how to reopen is that if they mandated that all schools across country go back, it would ignite a huge general strike. They are trying to preempt a strike by placing onus on districts. This whole thing is from [Education Secretary] Betsy DeVos’ playbook. She is the personification of all that’s wrong with education. DeVos and her husband are looking at this as a crisis to be exploited, to advance their campaign for school privatization.”

As opposition continues to grow, the Trump administration, congressional Republicans and various Republican-controlled state legislatures are threatening to reduce or cut funding to schools that do not reopen for in-person instruction.

The Senate version of the new stimulus package, dubbed the HEALS Act (Health, Economic Assistance, Liability Protection and Schools Act), commits two-thirds of the proposed \$70 billion in federal school funding only to those schools that reopen for in-person instruction for at least half of their students for half of the week. Schools, along with universities, hospitals and other corporations, would also be granted a five-year waiver that prevents them from being sued for any illness or death related to COVID-19.

In Florida, Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran issued an order that says by August 24 all 67 districts must open brick and mortar schools at least five days a week for all students. Schools that do not receive state approval for their reopening plans will not be fully funded, the order threatens.

In Texas, another hotspot for the virus, local health departments can close schools if there is an outbreak. However, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton ruled that closing schools as a preventive measure—as they were in March—would be against the law.

Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath warned that district superintendents must offer a semester of in-person learning for high school students after no more than eight weeks of online learning, otherwise districts would forfeit their state funding. At the same time, the superintendents were mandated to implement in-person learning for elementary and middle school students, not hybrid options, or face funding cuts.

Several other states, including Arizona, Indiana, South Carolina and Michigan, are threatening to use the financial stick to force cash-strapped schools to reopen. In Michigan, the Republican-controlled state legislature is trying to blackmail teachers to return to the classrooms otherwise their jobs will be given to private interests, including “pods,” where parents who can afford them hire teachers to provide private education to small groups of children, along with online charters, private and parochial schools.

Michigan House Bills 5910 and 5913—called the “Return to Learn” bills—would outsource the jobs of teachers and other instructional staff to non-certified instructors and for-profit companies to replace experienced educators. They would also create a voucher-style system that funnels public school money to parents who send their children to several e-learning providers during the day. The bills would also require benchmark testing three times over the next school year, which will be used to further punish public school districts grappling with already inadequate funding and the public health crisis.

In Detroit, the state’s largest school district, Superintendent Nikolai Vitti threatened in a town hall meeting last month that if the district does not offer face-to-face instruction in the fall, it risks losing students to charter schools or suburban districts that do. Vitti also boasted that the school district had received a sharp increase in applications for new teaching positions, an explicit threat to older, higher-paid teachers, many of whom fear returning to the classroom out of health concerns.

The Democrats have postured as opponents of Republican efforts to use the pandemic and the resulting economic crisis to accelerate school privatization. But the congressional Democrats’ federal legislation, dubbed the Heroes Act, would also leave school districts underfunded, forcing them to slash jobs and programs. Under the eight years of the Obama-Biden administration, the economic fallout of the 2008-09 financial crisis was used by the White House to vastly expand charter schools and slash teachers’ jobs and

pay.

The back-to-school campaign is being enthusiastically supported by Democratic governors like New York’s Andrew Cuomo, California’s Gavin Newsom and Michigan’s Gretchen Whitmer. As opposed to the Republicans, however, the Democrats have more closely coordinated the campaign to reopen the schools with the teacher unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

The NEA and AFT have spent the last two years desperately trying to prevent the wave of teacher strikes demanding improved school funding, wages and working conditions, from coalescing into a nation-wide strike against both corporate-controlled parties. Once again, the unions are seeking to divide educators by state and district and prevent a general strike against the homicidal plan to open the schools.

That is why teachers, school employees, parents and students must take the initiative in their own hands, through the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, in every school and neighborhood. These committees should prepare for a nationwide strike of educators and fight for the broadest support from every section of the working class.

“I support a nationwide strike if there is a massive endangering of students’ and teachers’ lives,” said Mike, the Michigan teacher, who said there was no safe way to reopen schools during the pandemic. “Say we go from 30 to 15 students and social distance? What about air circulation? No one’s talking about air flow and filtration in schools. But science says this is best for keeping spread of COVID down. Filtration systems are going to cost billions of dollars.

“I am in the middle of a high school that sits on cinder blocks. The structure of most school buildings is not conducive to having good air flow. I know my high school students and they are social creatures by nature. Social distancing will not be happening all of the time. Also, who is enforcing it? Not me, how will I teach? Then what is going to happen when they say, ‘Hey! We’ve run out of money!’ It’s about money, as long as it’s coming, things will be fine. When money runs out that is when people will stop playing nice.”



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