

# Mounting opposition by teachers against drive to reopen schools

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There have been close to 19 million COVID-19 cases and over 710,000 deaths worldwide, with 6,589 more deaths on Wednesday.

The United States will, by all accounts, exceed 5 million cases of COVID-19 today. The drive to reopen school systems in many states will undoubtedly accelerate the pandemic even more.

One of the first schools to open was Greenfield Central Junior High School in Indiana. On the first day, the superintendent of the Greenfield-Central Community School Corporation was notified that a student who had attended classes had tested positive for the coronavirus.

In Georgia, a second grader tested positive for the coronavirus on the first day of school. The Sixes Elementary in the Cherokee County School district had to close the classroom the next day for deep cleaning, and the instructor and 20 students were quarantined at home for two weeks.

At Gwinnett County Public Schools, which serves over 180,000 students, 260 district employees were prohibited from entering their schools due to positive tests for COVID-19 or from direct exposure to someone who was infected.

According to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, (AJC) “In-person training and meetings are taking place without areas being wiped down or disinfected in between, and masks aren’t being worn at all times, said several teachers who didn’t disclose their names when contacting the AJC. Others added that their school still hadn’t received hand sanitizers.”

Teachers around the US who spoke with the WSWS were outraged over the back-to school drive.

Chris, a long-time teacher in West Virginia, is currently working as a substitute and a home health care worker. He told the WSWS he would be in support of going out on strike in his role as a teacher and supports the demands laid out in the statement published on the WSWS yesterday.

“It does appear that the reopening compromised the effort to contain the virus. Here in West Virginia, the statewide date for bringing the kids back to school is September 8. Kanawha County Schools sent me a letter a couple of weeks

ago giving me three choices. (1) I would not return. (2) I would return for long-term substitute positions. (3) I would be available for long-term or day to day positions. I chose (3), knowing that a lot can happen between now and then. I have multiple risk factors and am in no hurry to get back to work. My son is scheduled to start back as a TA [teacher’s assistant] at Notre Dame on Monday.”

The federal CARES relief package provided a meager \$13.5 billion for K-12 education, less than one percent of the total stimulus package, despite educators indicating schools across the nation will need multiples of that sum to prepare for and retrofit dilapidated structures with proven systems to minimize the spread of the virus from class to class and person to person.

Adam Goldstein, a fifth-grade teacher in San Diego, noted that, “It’s incredible to me that the federal government would see the necessity of bailing out airlines and banks, and not see the need to do something similar for the public schools in this country.”

Louisiana currently ranks as the US state with the highest per capita rate of COVID-19 infections: 2,712 per 100,000 people. The state also ranks fifth for highest rate of per capita deaths. To date, Louisiana has recorded a total of 126,061 cases and 4,096 deaths.

Under these conditions, the Jefferson Parish School Board, representing the largest school district in the state, in the major suburbs of New Orleans, is planning to carry out a physical reopening on August 12. The district’s superintendent, Dr. James Gray, says that of the 50,000 students in the district, half have already registered for virtual learning, indicating widespread doubt by parents about the safety of sending kids back to school. Local WDSU-TV broke the news that a “handful” of teachers in the district have just tested positive for the virus.

Despite weeks of teachers rallying against the unsafe reopening of schools, teachers were forced back to the buildings on Monday, August 3 for meetings and to prepare the classrooms.

One elementary school teacher, who preferred to remain

anonymous, spoke to the WSWWS about the reopening. “We were told to assemble in the cafeteria, all faculty and staff. In Phase 2, the group size limit is supposed to be 25, but we had 60 people in the room,” she said.

While it was somewhat possible to remain distanced with just the staff in school, this would be impossible to do so once the students arrive. The teacher explained, “The principal even admitted that we would not be able to maintain the minimum 6-foot distance guideline.” When she set up her classroom, in which she is going to have 25 students, she tried to space out the desks, but “the spacing measured to 15 or maybe 18 inches apart.” (6 feet = 1.8 metres and 15–18 inches = 38–46 cm).

In addition to concern about her own health, having suffered from pneumonia in recent years, she worries for the students and their families. According to the “Strong Start” guideline released by the school board, students who present with fever during the morning temperature check will be sent into an isolation room with other potentially sick students. Considering that children are exposed to multiple viruses, from flu to stomach bugs, those without COVID-19 could end up in close, contained quarters with students who are infected.

When asked about the personal protective equipment that is promised in the same district-wide guideline, she said that the school has informed her that each teacher will receive “one mask, which hasn’t arrived yet. We will have hand sanitizer in the classroom and cafeteria, but no stations around the building.”

She expressed growing disgust with Governor John Bel Edwards (Democrat), who she says has “caved in to business interests and pressure from the White House, and now he’s ignoring common sense and has allowed the state to open up far too quickly.”

The current push to reopen schools on schedule, a position supported by both capitalist parties, forcing children in K-12 back to their desks amidst a raging pandemic, is based on the class logic that the extraction of surplus value from workers is paramount regardless of the consequences that come with it.

In the crudest and most malign terms, President Trump’s comments on Fox News capture the essential narrative being put forth to delude the public when he said, “This thing’s going away. It will go away like things go away, and my view is that schools should be open. If you look at children, children are almost ... and I would almost say definitely immune from this disease... they just don’t have a problem... we have to open our schools.”

The comments of Dr. Robert Redfield of the CDC to the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis are simply a public health cover for the criminal policy being

pursued. He said, “I don’t think I can emphasize it enough as the director for the Centers for Disease Control, the leading public health agency in the world—it is in the public health interest that these K-12 students to get the schools back open for face-to-face learning ... I want these kids back in school. I want it done smartly, but I think we have to be honest that the public health and interest of the students in the nation right now is to get a quality education and face-to-face learning. We need to get on with it.”

The dishonesty behind these sentiments is appalling. “To get on with it,” there must be certain conditions met, which include a contained pandemic where transmission is halted and surveillance in place to track it. These are just the most basic measures that are woefully lacking.

The number of tests conducted daily in the United States peaked on July 24, with 929,838 new tests. On August 5, this figure had rapidly declined to 664,219 new tests, back to levels from more than a month ago. It appears that the decline in the seven-day average of new cases has correlated with less testing, which could mean that state and federal governments are following Trump’s repeated directives to test less so that the infection numbers will go down.

All these figures must be taken with caution, even skepticism, because in the middle of July the Trump administration shifted reporting of hospitalizations away from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention into the hands of the Department of Health and Human Services, where Trump political appointees hold sway.

Not only is the number of tests conducted rapidly declining, but the time to report these time-sensitive results has also been, on average, taking four or more days, making them useless for contact tracing. According to Dr. Amesh Adalja, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Health Security, “A test result that comes back in seven or eight days is worthless for everybody—it shouldn’t be counted. It’s not a test in any kind of effective manner because it’s not actionable.”

The state of contact tracing across the nation has remained abysmal. Tracers in Arizona are unable to reach a significant number of infected individuals. Cities in Florida have given up on these programs. In New York City, tracers are complaining of paralyzed communications and difficulty training new tracers.



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