

First two weeks of US school reopenings lead to massive spread of COVID-19

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Over the past two weeks, numerous school districts across the US resumed in-person instruction, leading to multiple serious outbreaks of COVID-19 affecting thousands of students, educators, school workers and parents. With tens of millions more children slated to return to schools in the coming weeks, the dangers posed are enormous.

The exact spread of the disease through the schools is not known, because there is no national coordination of the school reopening process itself. States and school districts have different policies not only on what constitutes a “safe” reopening, but also on how, or whether, to record COVID-19 outbreaks and publish the data. There are nearly 14,000 school districts across the US, and each is being left to its own devices amid a global pandemic that is spiraling out of control.

The following is a partial list of outbreaks at US schools in just the last two weeks:

- In Georgia, where Governor Brian Kemp does not require masks in schools, Cherokee County School District has recorded at least 84 cases since reopening for face-to-face instruction on August 3. Over 1,400 additional students, teachers and staff at 22 schools across the district were in close contact with these positive cases and are now under two-week quarantine.

- Also in Georgia, North Paulding High School was forced to close Monday and Tuesday this week after a student’s photos and videos of students without masks packed into narrow hallways went viral. The school planned to reopen on Wednesday, but by then 35 cases had been reported and the shutdown was extended merely until next week.

- At least seven schools in the Houston County School District in central Georgia have reported at least one positive case, and an unknown number have been quarantined.

- Delaware Community Schools in Muncie, Indiana, sent 228 students at five schools into quarantine this week after they either exhibited symptoms of COVID-19 or came into contact with a player on the Delta High School football team who tested positive.

- In Livingston Parish, Louisiana, 141 students are under quarantine along with 17 teachers and staff, seven of whom tested positive. In Jefferson Parish, all 75 first graders as well as six teachers at Dr. John Ochsner Discovery Health Sciences Academy are now under

quarantine after one student tested positive.

- At Enterprise City Schools in Alabama, three students tested positive at two school sites. Roughly 120 were quarantined, 27 of them with symptoms and the rest for close contact.

- There are 19 cases recorded and an unknown number under quarantine in at least six different schools in Oahu and Kauai, Hawaii.

- At Manteca Unified School District in California, two teachers and two staff tested positive during the first week of classes, and more than a dozen teachers are now under quarantine.

- Two students tested positive and another seven were quarantined at South Jones High School in Jones County, Mississippi.

- This is in fact an international process, and in Berlin, Germany, COVID-19 has been detected in students and staff at eight schools after schools were reopened this week.

The return to in-person classes takes place as the COVID-19 pandemic is still raging through much of the United States. Since August 3, the day many of these schools began in-person teaching, the World Health Organization (WHO) has recorded 11,580 new COVID deaths and more than 575,000 new cases in the US.

At least 97,000 children tested positive in the US in the last two weeks of July, and the latest scientific evidence shows that children can not only become severely ill from COVID, but they can also be even more potent spreaders of the disease than adults. A recent study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, found that babies and young children infected with COVID-19 can carry viral loads in their throats and airways up to 100 times more than adults.

US teachers and students are under immense pressure from the government to accept the deadly policy of a return to school. For the ruling class, the return to in-person schooling is key to the larger policy of a “return to work” for masses of workers.

In response to the pandemic, Democrats and Republicans in Congress passed the CARES Act on a near-unanimous basis, funneling trillions of dollars to the banks and big businesses. Now, their plan is to squeeze this money out of the working class in the

form of wage cuts, speedup of production and further attacks on benefits. But in order to do any of this, workers must be at work, and therefore their children must be at school.

That is why the reckless rush to open the schools is a bipartisan policy. This involves not only Republicans like Trump, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis—who on Thursday compared teachers to Navy Seals who had to overcome “obstacles” like the commandos that killed Osama bin Laden. It also involves Democrats like New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer and others.

The campaign to reopen schools has been met with growing opposition among educators, education workers, parents and students. In addition to numerous car-caravans and other demonstrations, teachers and students have taken to social media to express opposition and to expose the disastrous conditions they confront in the schools, even in the face of threats and recriminations from school administrators.

Spearheading the campaign to reopen schools, the Trump administration has become increasingly strident in its attacks on educators and public education, while stoking divisions between parents and teachers. On Wednesday, Trump held a live-streamed event called “Kids First: Getting America’s Children Safely Back to School,” in which he repeatedly suggested that schools should be defunded if they do not return to full capacity. DeVos slandered teachers by stating that children “can’t be held captive to other people’s fears or agendas.”

Following the lead of Trump, state and local officials are punishing those that speak out or seek to maintain their health and safety. In El Mirage, Arizona, a music teacher faces a fine of \$2,000 after he resigned, without sufficient notice, rather than risk contracting COVID-19 by reporting to his school building to teach virtual classes online. A Dysart Unified School District spokesperson said that the district can waive the fee in the case of a medical emergency, but that it was choosing to enforce it during the pandemic, to make sure classrooms are staffed.

The students who revealed the dangerous conditions at Georgia’s North Paulding High School were suspended for unauthorized use of smartphones at school, and the principal was recorded threatening others with “consequences” if they post anything “negative” on social media. The suspensions were only lifted when teachers and students opposed it and the school became the subject of national attention due to the viral leaks.

Nikolai Vitti, superintendent of the Detroit Public Schools Community District, threatened teachers over their use of social media to expose conditions. In an email communique titled “Protection of Employee Freedom of Speech and Limits to It,” he wrote, “guidelines to help employees avoid situation in which [their] expressions may conflict with the district’s interests.” These “guidelines” include the following: “A teacher must not express an opinion for the purpose of persuading students to the teacher’s point of view.”

Nonetheless, teachers are taking to social media by the thousands to express their opposition, expose conditions and share information. In particular, Facebook groups containing thousands, or even tens of thousands, of teachers have sprung up in recent weeks, such as Iowa Educators for a Safe Return to School (21,567 members), Illinois for a Safe Return to Campus (32,583), Texas Teachers for Safe Reopening (47,973) and Parents Against The Opening Of Schools (113,505).

Teachers are posting photos of the inadequate cleaning supplies and

PPE provided by the schools. One post shows a single mask, a package of alcoholic wipes, and one bottle of disinfectant, noting “this is what the school gave me for PPE for the entire year.” Another teacher quipped, “Seems they forgot the urn for my ashes.”

Many teachers have posted photos of plastic guards they have built with their own supplies, because the schools have not provided any, only to be told by administrators that such elementary protections constructed by teachers are not allowed.

One teacher who made such a makeshift guard wrote movingly, “I got Covid over the summer and it permanently damaged my heart (aortic aneurysm). So, I came up with what I thought was a creative way to further protect myself not that I’m high risk. My largest class is 40, desks are 15 to 18 inches apart, and we don’t have dividers. I was told it is not approved and has to be taken down. Does anyone know why? Who can I take this to?”

In the face of this disaster, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) continue to collaborate with state and local officials, peddling the lie that schools can be reopened safely. In Chicago, Los Angeles and other cities, the unions have reached deals to start the semester with online learning only but this is maneuver aimed at preventing a revolt by teachers and parents and to give Democratic officials more time to prepare for a full reopening.

The mounting opposition among teachers, education workers, parents and students to the homicidal campaign to reopen schools must become organized and unified across district and state boundaries. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls upon all those opposed to reopening schools to form a network of independent rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, in every school and neighborhood to prepare a nationwide general strike to halt the opening of schools and force the closure of those that have opened. At the same time, these committees must demand full income to parents and caregivers who stay at home with children, a massive funding program to provide high-speed internet access and state-of-the-art online learning, along with universal testing and contact tracing to contain the spread of the virus.

Pitted in a battle against the entire political establishment, educators, school workers, parents and students have powerful allies in the broader working class—autoworkers, logistics, service, health care, and more—who confront the same campaign to force them to work in unsafe conditions. Networks of safety committees must be built in every industry, uniting the working class in a common struggle against the capitalist system and both of the corporate-controlled parties.

We urge all those who wish to take up such a struggle to contact us today and sign up for the WSWs Educators Newsletter to follow developments in the fight against the unsafe reopening of schools and in defense of public education.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact