

Hawaii schools to reopen August 17 as opposition grows

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Amid a recent surge in COVID-19 cases and an explosion of opposition from teachers and parents for plans to begin in person instruction in Hawaii Public Schools, the Hawaii Department of Education (HIDOE) has altered their plan for reopening. The new plan includes full distance learning for four weeks after an initial in-person orientation for all students at their school sites, which will span the first week of school starting Monday, August 17. However parents and teachers argue it is not enough.

Nearly a month ago, the state of Hawaii was touting the low number of cases as a justification for full reopening of schools, but COVID-19 cases are now climbing at an alarming rate with 4,312 cases and 40 deaths. Yesterday saw a new record high of 355 cases, and already in the month of August, COVID-19 has claimed the lives of 14 Hawaiians. Of added concern, Hawaii currently has the highest rate of transmission in the US, at 1.29, according to The COVID Tracking Project.

The majority of recent cases have been traced to prisons and shelters on the island of Oahu. Approximately 86 newly reported cases are part of a growing cluster at the Oahu Community Correctional Center, and there is also a growing cluster at a homeless shelter in Iwilei, with 20 cases under investigation.

School openings in recent weeks have been disastrous, with at least nine cases of COVID-19 at both private and public schools throughout the state this month alone. In one instance, this past Wednesday, a high school student tested positive at a Kamehameha Schools, Hawaii Island Campus, setting off an immediate lockdown of the entire campus, which includes students in pre-school, elementary and high school. It is unclear how many students and staff will be under quarantine as a result. Many private schools such as Kamehameha Schools throughout the state have already reopened the schools to in-person instruction.

Parent and teacher opposition has been ongoing for weeks leading up to the reopening of Hawaii public schools. An initial wave of opposition prompted the HIDOE to delay the start date by two weeks from August 4 to August 17. Now, amid a rise in cases throughout the state and in schools that have already reopened to in-person instruction, many parents and teachers are demanding a halt to in-person instruction for all Hawaii

public schools.

The dangerous school reopening policy is part of the HIDOE's new three-phase plan spearheaded by Superintendent Dr. Christina Kashimoto. Phase one of the reopening plan, which starts this Monday and lasts for one week, calls for in-person instruction at all 238 school sites throughout the state despite the acceleration of cases. Students will meet with all teachers and receive instructions and materials for distance learning. However, an in person start to the school year for the 180,000 students and 13,000 teachers in Hawaii Public Schools will have a disastrous impact on the spread of the virus. The state has the current highest rate of transmission and cases are on the rise.

The reopening policy has created an uproar among teachers and parents who are facing a fight for their lives and have taken to social media to organize opposition. The Facebook group Hawai'i for a Safe Return to Schools has grown to over 7,500 members. Many parents have said they will not have their child participate in the first week of school. One parent argues, "Our middle school is having the kids come in next week, 2 hours and 45 min in one classroom for 'training.' We're not participating." Another declared, "I wrote my son's principal. My son will not be attending at all no way! Even more Now since the news has been released that his school has been tied to a case of covid!!!"

Faced with this growing opposition, many school site administrators have made changes to their plans for the first days of school. Some have opted for a "grab and go" orientation for week one where parents drive through the school site to pick up materials for their child. Other school sites have opted for a full virtual orientation, but many schools will still have students receive face-to-face instruction from teachers throughout the week.

Phase two of the reopening plan outlines fully distance learning for four weeks' time, from August 24 through September 11. However, all teachers and staff will continue to report to their school sites to deliver distance-learning instruction. Distance learning will also not apply to all special education teachers and students who will have to be in face-to-face instruction full-time, as will staff in the learning labs at schools who monitor students who do not have wifi access at

home.

Special education educators are at a high risk as the HDOE has declared that if distance learning does not prove effective for special ed students, full time face-to-face instruction and in many cases, full contact will be required. On Wednesday, a Hawaii special ed teacher in a post on Facebook notes, “I have submitted my leave. I do sped preschool - we haven’t received any PPE. No masks, gloves, shields. I was asking for gowns but that was turned down. Knowing that I would be exposed to body fluid, doing toilet training/changing diapers and unable to be 6 feet distanced I had to take leave. I would have preferred to distance. My coworker and I have created individual binders for each of our kids. I will continue to advocate for those that don’t feel safe, don’t have enough PPE. Covid won’t discriminate.”

Many Special Education teachers across the country have voiced their concern for being pushed into classrooms to work with populations who, because of their needs, have difficulty adhering to the most basic hygiene. Staff change diapers, help them eat, and often work in high contact with bodily fluids on a daily basis.

Phase three of the reopening plan lays out a tentative proposal to transition to a hybrid-learning model or continue full distance learning by September 14. HDOE claims it will monitor the situation and work with the governor’s office and the Hawaii State Department of Health to assess whether or not students can safely return to in-person blended learning models.

In response to the immense opposition, the Hawaii State Teacher Association (HSTA) held a press briefing on Thursday claiming it will file a prohibited practice complaint with the Hawaii Labor Relations Board (HLRB) against the state of Hawaii and will file a class grievance on behalf of Bargaining Unit 05 employees because of violations to the HSTA collective bargaining agreement.

These are empty gestures aimed at providing a political cover for the unions’ capitulation to the state authorities. Just a few weeks ago, HSTA was silent amid the growing opposition to the reopening plans. Now, facing a wellspring of anger from teachers and parents, HSTA focuses on hairsplitting arguments over lack of documentation from the Department of Health (DOH). The HSTA argues the DOH has not provided written guidance on triggers and standards which the DOH will use to determine when schools are safe to open for in-person learning, when they should close and/or should reopen after a closure.

In its press release, the HSTA openly states that lawsuits take time. In other words, no action is likely before the start of school. In the meantime, the union advises teachers to pressure site administrators and consider a leave of absence for the first week. The release states, “If you believe your worksite remains unsafe or hazardous conditions exist, you should notify your administrator and request they take action to address them.” Anticipating teachers will take leave the first week of school

over concern for their safety, the HSTA merely provides language for the type of leave teachers have the right to use “as appropriate” and blames the HDOE for lowering the education requirement for substitute positions to Hawaii high school graduates in the event teachers do not show up next week.

In a further exposure of the union’s toothless posturing, during the livestreamed press briefing Thursday, Corey Rosenlee, HSTA president, was asked by a member of the public if the union will call a strike or advocate for teachers to stay home. His response was, “We are doing what is allowed under our contract. This is why we are filing the HLRB claim and doing a class action grievance. The contract does not allow us to strike; we have to file these legal practices in these cases.” This is the textbook answer from the unions time and time again, that their hands are always tied under the contracts that they have helped to develop and rubber-stamped. Both the HDOE and HSTA work together to suppress any strike action.

Indeed, HSTA helped to develop the very plans that originally had schools going back to in-person instruction starting August 4. Unsurprisingly, nowhere in their class action press release do they demand that all schools remain closed, particularly as cases are rising sharply.

Teacher unions across the US and globally have overseen decades of cuts to public education that have devastated public school systems leading to overcrowded classrooms and underpaid staff and teachers. In the US, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association have collaborated in the expansion of for-profit charter schools while backing the very same Democratic Party politicians who have defunded the schools.

Teachers and parents are now confronting the fact that the unions are their bitter enemies and will do nothing to protect lives. The drive by HDOE with the collaboration of the unions to reopen schools is not simply a misguided policy. Above all, it is driven by the demands of big business to free parents for a deadly return to work. This poses the urgent necessity for teachers and school staff to organize independently of the unions. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party call for teachers to follow the example of autoworkers in building rank-and-file safety committees in every district to fight to close schools to in-person learning until the virus is contained.

Such a fight must be guided by a socialist strategy that insists that the lives of students and teachers must take priority over the profit drive of big business.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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