

Maryland's Republican governor overrules county order for private schools to remain closed

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On August 3, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan (R) came out against an order by Montgomery County, Maryland Health Officer Dr. Travis Gayles barring private schools in the county from opening before October 1 for the upcoming academic year. Hogan issued an emergency executive order barring blanket closures of schools, reversing an earlier order that gave local health authorities that power.

Hogan said in a statement that the decision on reopening should be left up to individual schools. He derided the “blanket closure mandate imposed by Montgomery County” as “overly broad and inconsistent with the powers intended to be delegated to the county health officer.” Public schools in Montgomery County will remain closed for online-only education starting at the end of the month.

As of Tuesday, Maryland had over 101,000 cumulative confirmed cases of coronavirus, according to the state's Department of Health. Montgomery County, which lies northwest of the District of Columbia, has been among the hardest-hit counties in the state, reporting over 19,166 cases and 812 dead. While Maryland initially was one of the first states in the Mid-Atlantic region to impose lockdowns on businesses deemed nonessential, in May it also became one of the earliest in the region to begin reopening shuttered businesses, even as the number of cases continued to rise.

Hogan at the time made it clear that rather than basing public health decisions on the data on new daily cases, the state would instead focus on hospitalization rates. In May alone, the total number of confirmed cases in the state rose from about 23,000 on May 1 to over 52,000 on May 31. The number of new daily cases

bottomed out in mid-June but are almost back to May levels of over 1,000 new cases a day.

The decision to force the reopening of private schools in Montgomery County places thousands of students, faculty, and staff at a direct risk of contracting and spreading the virus, potentially bringing infection home to families and exacerbating the spread, inevitably leading to more deaths from COVID-19. This disastrous policy, however, met with only a tepid response from Democrats, who control not only the legislative and executive branches of Montgomery County but both houses of the state general assembly.

Responding to Hogan's decision, Dr. Gayles said in his own statement: “Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have based our decisions on science and data. At this point the data does not suggest that in-person instruction is safe for students or teachers. We have seen increases in transmission rates for COVID-19 in the State of Maryland, the District of Columbia and the Commonwealth of Virginia, particularly in younger age groups, and this step is necessary to protect the health and safety of Montgomery County residents.”

A few days later, on Wednesday, August 5, Dr. Gayles issued an updated order for private schools in the county to remain closed, citing authority granted to him by state law requiring local officials to contain the spread of communicable diseases. Nevertheless, bowing to pressure from Hogan as well as lawsuits filed by parents of students at some of the affected schools, Montgomery County issued a revised decision at the end of the week lifting the previous order for private schools not to open for in-person classes before October.

Contradicting his previous statement about following “science and data,” Gayles made it clear that the county’s decision was based not on data showing lower transmission rates but rather on obedience to Hogan’s Republican administration.

Gayles said in the revised order on August 7 that State Health Secretary Robert Neall had sent a memo the previous day to local public health officials reminding them that efforts to keep schools closed run contrary to state policy, unless done on the basis of individual schools. In his statement, Gayles stressed that, despite the revocation of the previous order, “it is neither safe nor in the interest of public health for any school to return for in-person learning this fall.”

The dispute between Hogan’s administration and the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services demonstrates the reckless course being pursued by the ruling class to reopen schools during the coronavirus pandemic. This policy is fundamentally driven by the larger effort to force workers back on the job, putting them in harm’s way in order to boost profits in the wake of federal bailouts for entire industries.

At the start of the pandemic, Hogan received praise from many liberal media outlets as the Republican Party’s respectable foil to President Donald Trump. As a Republican governor in a state otherwise controlled by the Democratic Party, Hogan’s early action on lockdowns garnered him favor with outlets such as CNN and Democratic colleagues such as New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo. Former NAACP president Ben Jealous, the Democratic candidate for governor in the last general election, also praised his former opponent in March, saying that Hogan “has shown great leadership in pulling our state together during this crisis.”

In light of the dispute over blanket school closings, however, Hogan’s erstwhile supporters have turned into critics. On August 8, CNN reported: “The reality of politics has brought the popular Hogan back down to earth this week. As coronavirus cases have risen in Maryland since late June, he has found this image as the consummate crisis manager and able governor challenged by liberal politicians from Democratic jurisdictions and government bureaucrats. The episodes have revealed the limits of Hogan’s power to overcome his political affiliation with the GOP and punctured his

media profile of the ‘reasonable Republican.’”

In fact, Hogan’s forcing schools to reopen is part of a bipartisan agenda pursued by both Democrats and Republicans throughout the United States. This is most starkly demonstrated by New York’s Governor Cuomo, Hogan’s successor as chair of the National Governors Association. Only days after Hogan’s intervention in Montgomery County, Cuomo announced a statewide reopening of schools in New York, despite that state possessing one of the highest body counts for COVID-19 in the world.

Maryland’s governor also came under fire this month for a decision to conduct elections in November in the usual fashion, even though there is a shortage of poll workers due to fears of COVID-19. Maryland had rescheduled its primary this year from April to June and mailed out ballots to all voters regardless of whether they requested one in advance. For the general election, however, voters will have to request a mail-in ballot by October 20.

Democrats have derided Hogan’s order as an effort to reduce turnout among eligible voters. Efforts to force the public to vote in person during the pandemic will have the desired effect of discouraging voters from participating at all, an outcome deemed more favorable to Trump’s prospects in the November election.



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