

Colorado teacher fired for raising concerns about school reopenings speaks to the WSWS

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The start of the academic year is already underway for the majority of Colorado's K-12 schools. Without a set mandate from the state regarding the reopening of schools, districts are making their own decisions on reopening plans at the start of the school year, which range from full in-person instruction, a "hybrid" model of partial in-person and partial online instruction, full-online instruction for a limited time, or some combination of the three.

With Colorado's emphasis on local control, the reopenings are unfolding in a piecemeal and highly dangerous fashion. The state now has 55,800 COVID-19 cases and 1,926 deaths, with the virus increasingly spreading out of control.

Concerned teachers have begun organizing and speaking out to oppose the homicidal campaign to reopen schools. Gregory, a teacher from Fort Collins who was recently fired for raising safety concerns, spoke with the WSWS about the conditions at his school and district.

Gregory stated, "I do not believe getting people together in the same rooms, even with state-of-the-art ventilation systems, is safe."

He added, "Researchers from the University of Minnesota found that in indoor spaces, good ventilation will filter some of the virus out of the air, but may leave more viral particles on surfaces. In the classroom setting, after running a 50-minute simulation with an asymptomatic teacher consistently talking, the researchers found that only 10 percent of the aerosols were filtered out. The majority of the particles were instead deposited on the walls.

"I feel that we don't know very much about the virus and its potential to impact health long-term, though we know what some people felt like when afflicted with it, and we know that we may have 300,000 dead in the US by the winter break in a lot of school schedules.

"The fact is that any of us can be a vector, and any of us might be susceptible to the serious illnesses and deaths we have seen and recorded in the country since before March. I do not want to infect anyone in my community. Students could go home and infect family or neighbors. Maybe that will happen anyway, but I don't want to participate in spreading the virus. Further, I am one of at least three staff members in my school's community who are at 'high risk of serious illness or death' if we get infected by COVID-19.

"I was fired because I was concerned about health, safety, and risk, and the head of school made me feel wrongfully terminated. I spoke about the issue and shared current research and information,

I was considered rude because I didn't want to kill or be killed."

Earlier this month Colorado Governor Jared Polis said that opening schools in Colorado was "reasonably safe" and announced that he is sending his own children back to school. Despite baseless reassurances from Polis, many schools that reopened to in-person instruction have already begun reporting outbreaks of COVID-19, and some have carried out temporary school closures. Guidance from the state's Department of Education and health officials is inadequate, asking districts to "consider" strategies like cohorting, masks for students age 11 and older, and limiting high school class sizes for social distancing purposes. The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) and the Colorado Department of Education, working alongside the Governor's office, developed a set of guidelines for Local Public Health Agencies (LPHA) and school districts to consider in their reopening plans.

The guidelines are organized by the level of COVID-19 incidence in the community: Stay at Home (high level of COVID-19), Safer at Home (mid-level of COVID-19), and Protect Our Neighbors (lower level of COVID-19).

These guidelines place hundreds of thousands of families at risk as they rely on pseudoscience and lies that portray youth as immune from and less likely to transmit the virus. To justify pushing students and teachers back into in-person instruction, the guidelines cite the American Association of Pediatrics which suggests "that younger children play a smaller role in onward transmission of COVID-19 and that the risk of transmission between children and from children to adults is low." Multiple comprehensive studies have refuted these claims, and indicate the opposite to be true, that children are more likely to spread the virus than adults.

Further guidelines from the CDPHE and CDE state that schools should try to implement mitigation tactics such as 6-foot social distancing, mask wearing, directed movement, smaller group sizes and minimal touch. However, if schools are unable to meet these safety measures, they advise, "consider how to layer [safety measures]. For instance, if students cannot remain 6-foot apart, cohort students. Cohorting is the most important strategy to keep schools open. If strict cohorts cannot occur, some cohorting is better than none."

A recent study from the University of Florida confirmed that an infective aerosolized form of minute COVID-19 particles can become airborne and travel 16 feet or more, well beyond the

recommended six feet for social distancing. These aerosols can also remain suspended in the air for hours in poorly ventilated spaces. The findings make concrete that all classrooms where children and teachers will gather are dangerous and deadly, particularly in schools that do not require the use of masks or social distancing.

Unsurprisingly, cases have already erupted in schools throughout Colorado. Last week, a teacher at Josephine Hodgkins Leadership Academy in Westminster Public Schools (WPS), tested positive for COVID-19, sending 125 students into a 14-day quarantine. The school has remained open due to the use of cohorts as part of their in-person learning model.

In a recent announcement responding to the quarantine, Westminster district spokesperson Steve Saunders stated, “WPS created its plan with the understanding that at some point a student or staff member would test positive,” the announcement stated.

There have been other reports of cases in schools throughout the state, including Sand Creek Elementary, Fort Lupton High School, Burlington Middle School, Windsor Middle School, Soaring Eagles Elementary School, North Mesa Elementary School, and Grandview High School. These schools have closed their doors to in-person instruction until September 8, except for Soaring Eagles Elementary which will resume in person on Monday, September 1.

State and district officials have pointed to the low case count in recent weeks to justify the resumption of face-to-face instruction, but positive cases of the virus in schools have gone largely unreported. There is no doubt that cases will continue to rise in the coming days and weeks as more schools open to in-person instruction.

Colorado has over 900,000 students who attend public schools. Almost six in ten of these children have at least one parent working in an “essential” industry and more than half of all households are living below the poverty line with household income of less than \$55,000.

The majority of districts in the state, 146 out of 178, are defined as rural. A study conducted by the Colorado Futures Center found that nearly five percent of school-age children in the state, around 54,000 students, are living in households without internet access, primarily in the rural western slope region or the southwest portion of the state.

This presents difficult conditions amid the pandemic, as many of the rural schools also struggle with geographic isolation, low funding, and aging and dilapidated facilities. Before the pandemic, conditions were already dire for tens of thousands of rural poor that lack access to basic nutrition, healthcare, and other vital services.

While rank and file teachers have threatened strike action to halt the reopening of schools, the Colorado Education Association (CEA) has rejected this and instead negotiated with state officials to facilitate the reopening of schools, simply demanding that “safety protections, protocols and precautions must be provided by school districts for all students and staff.”

Last month, CEA President Amie Baca-Oehlert claimed that “everyone’s biggest priority is to get to in-person learning.” She sought to obfuscate the science of the pandemic, saying that “contradictory studies and data” make it hard to find consensus on

what the science is saying about the coronavirus in schools.

But the reality is not one of “conflicting data,” but fundamentally a class question. The ruling class is elevating pseudoscience and questionable data to justify reopening schools, while an increasing number of studies point to the dangerous airborne character of the virus which upends the 6-foot “distancing” upon which so many reopening plans are based. If 6-foot distancing does nothing to prevent the spread of COVID-19, then the entire basis on which schools, factories, and other workplaces have reopened under supposed “safe” conditions is thrown out the window.

The 2019 Denver teachers’ strike centered on the demand that the merit-based pay ProComp system be abolished. The Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) isolated this powerful struggle and shutdown the strike after three days, pushing teachers back into the classroom under a sellout contract that did nothing to meet their demands to overturn ProComp. Instead, a complex tiered system of pay based on experience and academic degrees, teacher evaluations based on test scores, potentially biased student and fellow teacher reviews was implemented.

Facing what are now life-and-death conditions, educators must assimilate the lessons from the 2018-2019 strike wave, including the betrayal from the DCTA, CEA, and NEA/AFT, and begin organizing independently of the trade unions.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has been formed to coordinate and facilitate the building of a network of rank-and-file safety committees in every school and neighborhood, to organize the immense opposition to the murderous plan to reopen schools. All those who agree with this perspective should contact us today, join our Facebook group and make plans to attend our next online call-in meeting Saturday, August 29. Register today and share the event widely with your coworkers!



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