

# New York City's school reopening plan: Anatomy of a crime

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**27 August 2020**

New York City's self-proclaimed "progressive" mayor, Democrat Bill de Blasio, has proven just as willing to carry out the homicidal policy of school reopening amidst the coronavirus pandemic as his most reactionary Republican counterparts.

The claims being made by de Blasio and New York City schools' Chancellor Richard Carranza that the Department of Education (DOE) is carrying out all necessary measures to safely open the city's more than 1,600 schools—serving more than a million students—are a patent fraud. This is being sold to parents through a combination of half-truths and outright lies.

There is widespread opposition to the reopening of schools from teachers and school administrators. At the same time, a growing number of parents and students are raising concerns over both the safety and the viability of the city's hybrid models, which bring students into school buildings between one and three days each week.

During the first two weeks of August, school principals and leadership teams from non-District 75 (a non-geographical district designated for special education schools) middle and high schools were told they had to select from one of five DOE-approved models for hybrid learning, despite having been asked previously to develop reopening plans grounded in the reality and needs of each school community. School leaders were told that waivers allowing for alternative models developed by school communities would not be granted.

An enormous amount of pressure has been put on principals to quickly select a pre-approved hybrid model even before the results from family surveys, in which parents can select between in-person, so-called hybrid instruction, or 100 percent remote instruction for their children. Similarly, model decisions were being made before final decisions on teacher requests for medical waivers for in-person teaching were forwarded to principals.

In other words, principals and school teams were essentially excluded from any meaningful input into the reopening process while being forced to choose a hybrid model without considering the kind of basic data on student population or staffing needed to make any rational decision. Parents were also being asked to choose a hybrid model without clear communication of the basic details of said models or adequate time to consider how they would impact work or childcare.

## Chaotic changes from one week to another

The pre-approved models disseminated by DOE central provoked immediate disbelief and consternation among principals and school leadership teams because they lack consistency from one week to another, unnecessarily complicating the job of teachers now being tasked with managing multiple groups of students receiving instruction both in-person

and remotely, and making the coordination of childcare onerous for parents.

For example, in so-called Model 2, which is listed as "chancellor recommended" for middle schools, students enrolled in hybrid instruction are divided into three in-person groups, or cohorts A, B and C, which meet alternately between one and two different days each week over the course of a three-week cycle.

School administrators and school-based leadership teams have been abandoned by district superintendents and DOE central administration and now face enormous challenges in solving complicated logistical problems stemming from the ill-conceived reopening policy.

For example, many school buildings have limited access points through which students can enter upon arrival at school. In the case of large school buildings and campus sites, i.e. buildings that house multiple schools, there is a high likelihood of students gathering in large concentrations as they wait to enter buildings after newly mandated temperature checks, often through scanning machines.

Additionally, families of many students that require school busses to get to school, particularly at the elementary and middle school levels, have been notified that they will no longer be able to receive this service due to scheduling difficulties and the absence of social distancing protocols for busses.

## What about asymptomatic and infected children?

With much fanfare, de Blasio has stated that students and staff would receive daily temperature checks upon arrival at school. Yet, the spread of coronavirus from asymptomatic persons is a proven fact rendering temperature checks an inadequate means to identify people with the virus. At present, school administrators have gotten no response to the logical question of who is to be tasked with conducting temperature checks, nor have school personnel received trainings on how to properly and safely conduct said checks. Predictably, widespread opposition to the idea of conducting these daily temperature checks has emerged among non-medically trained school staff.

Likewise, other critically important questions around protocols for students or staff that display COVID-19 symptoms while in school remain unanswered. Even in cases where schools have an assigned nurse, which is not the case in every school, and a proper isolation space has been identified, the supply of appropriate PPE as well as questions related to the staffing of these specific spaces within schools are still up in the air. Guidelines issued by New York state prevent a school nurse from staffing an isolation room because of the need to respond to other potential emergencies.

Across New York City, school administrators, teachers and parents are

also raising serious and still unanswered questions around protocols for regular cleaning and disinfecting of schools as well as ventilation.

At the same time that de Blasio and his schools' chancellor have made promises to carry out nightly "deep cleaning" of school buildings, custodial engineers across city schools are seeing massive budget cuts and staff reductions. At some schools, custodial budgets are being slashed by as much as 20 percent, and already understaffed cleaning crews are being further reduced. Indeed, there is growing opposition to school reopening even among custodial engineers, who are increasingly expressing frustration over what they view as false promises being made from City Hall for which they will be held accountable.

### **Decaying infrastructure and poor ventilation**

Perhaps no other school facilities issue has received more attention in the past weeks as the ventilation systems in the approximately 1,600 public schools in New York City. This is particularly due to the growing body of scientific evidence that identifies aerosol or airborne transmission as playing a greater role in the spread of the virus than previously understood. It is commonly known that defective and inadequate ventilation systems, along with lead-contaminated water, are major problems highlighting the decades of neglect that plague aging school infrastructure across many areas in the United States.

During a recent virtual town hall meeting with concerned parents, schools' Chancellor Carranza blatantly lied to attendees when he stated that HVAC systems in schools across the city were being updated with enhanced filtration mechanisms over the summer in preparation for reopening. What he did not mention was that only a small percentage of the city's school buildings have newer HVAC systems that allow for updates to air filtration mechanisms, and in most cases, the city is merely replacing old air filters with newer ones that have increased *mer*v ratings, a measure for how much capacity a filter has to capture particles in the air. However, even this wholly inadequate "update" is limited to buildings constructed after the 1970s while the vast majority of school buildings in New York City, as in many other areas across the US, are significantly older and do not have central air filtration or even adequate air circulation systems.

In a similarly cynical example of intentional deception, the DOE sent all employees an email this past Saturday, August 22, offering them one-time, free COVID-19 testing with expedited results at one of nine test centers throughout the city between Sunday, August 23 and Thursday, August 27. Assuming that all of the approximately 80,000 DOE employees, most of whom are on vacation this week, actually showed up for testing at these centers, the likely backlog would wreak havoc at a time in which resources are being systematically siphoned away from testing centers for the public. In any event, a one-time test, two weeks before the projected start of school, even if the results were to arrive sooner than the current eight-day average wait for all but the super wealthy fortunate enough to have access to rapid result tests, is meaningless for teachers being asked to risk daily exposure.

Significantly, public school students are not even being offered this paltry, one-time measure much less access for them and school staff to frequent, free, rapid-result testing as one of the conditions for reopening schools.

The vast majority of the parents who have chosen to send their children back to school within these hybrid models have described the decision as agonizing, explaining that it is more a consequence of being forced back to work or concerns about the continuing loss of special services than the belief that schools will be safe.

Indeed, as many parents are increasingly coming to understand, the students returning to school will find it unlike anything they were familiar with. For example, class schedules are being designed to limit or prevent movement of students at the middle and high school levels in order to prevent now infamous scenarios of large numbers of students traveling through hallways, as was recently documented at a school in North Paulding, Georgia. This means that during the time in which students are present for classes, they will be expected to remain seated in one room.

Cooperative learning, an instructional approach recommended for decades by education experts that promotes active collaboration between students, will be all but eliminated from in-person lessons at all grade levels to adhere to social distancing guidelines. Many of the remaining enrichment classes such as music and physical education will be conducted online even for students attending in-person as these activities entail vigorous movement or the use of wind instruments. Complicated bathroom procedures will have to be developed and implemented to limit the number of students using these facilities at any given time and ensure thorough cleaning after each use.

Even the serving of school lunch raises serious concerns for which the DOE has no answers. For example, to avoid crowded cafeterias many schools are considering having lunches brought to classrooms in which students will essentially remain "quarantined" throughout the day, raising concerns around complicating the already difficult jobs of custodians as well as creating the contradictory scenario of indoor eating for school-aged children at a time when it is still prohibited in restaurants throughout the city.

### **Unions collaborate with de Blasio**

Against the backdrop of this ill-conceived and homicidal drive to reopen schools, it is essential to recognize the role being played by teachers' unions like the United Federation of Teachers (UFT).

In a clear example of its criminally complicit role in the fraud that de Blasio and his DOE cronies are attempting to carry out, the UFT recently began dispatching bureaucratic functionaries to schools to conduct so-called "safety walkthroughs." These walkthroughs are taking place in coordination with the Department of School Facilities (DSF), largely behind the backs of rank-and-file union members, who are not being invited to attend. The UFT functionaries dispatched to conduct these walkthroughs are typically retired teachers without any background in building engineering or maintenance systems. They have been observed to simply follow a list of questions with boxes to check off, accepting as truth any response given by school authorities.

In one recent instance, a UFT representative became visibly upset when a rank-and-file teacher showed up uninvited for the walkthrough and questioned the validity of the blindly held assumption that windows capable of opening six inches provide sufficient airflow in rooms lacking other means to circulate air. In another, a UFT representative admitted to completing the checklist, which covers topics ranging from ventilation to the school nurse, PPE and lunches, via telephone with an Assistant Principal in charge of building security.

These bogus walkthroughs highlight the treacherous role being played by the UFT, which intends to ensnare teachers with a combination of empty threats to strike, while opposing any such collective action, as well as promoting illusions in the court system and the Democratic Party.

The improvised and reckless nature of school reopening policy in New York City is leaving teachers, parents and school administrators alike anxious, frustrated and angry. In response to growing popular opposition, de Blasio is doubling down as his cronies within the DOE impose new

measures to censor communication between school staff and parents.

If educators are going to save lives, they must take matters into their own hands. This is why teachers, other school workers, parents and students need to form rank-and-file committees of their own, independent of the UFT, to organize genuine opposition to the homicidal school policy being imposed by the de Blasio-Carranza regime.

New York City has already been an epicenter of the deadly pandemic, suffering the loss of 24,000 people to COVID-19. If another catastrophe is to be prevented, teachers must unite with health care, transit, logistics and other workers to prepare collective action, as part of the fight for a nationwide general strike to halt the school openings.



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