

COVID-19 outbreaks continue unabated at US schools, putting millions at risk

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The past week has seen a deepening of the disastrous crisis surrounding the reopening of schools in the US. As outbreaks continue to erupt and cases rise throughout the country, the ruling class is making clear that it will march teachers, students and their families toward death to reopen the schools, deemed to be essential in fully reopening the economy.

One of the biggest lies advanced by the Trump administration to justify reopening schools is that children are less susceptible to COVID-19 or at low risk of facing serious repercussions. Yet in the last month, as more schools and districts have opened their doors to in-person instruction, more than 74,000 children in the US have tested positive for the coronavirus, a 21 percent increase between August 6 and August 20.

Over the past two weeks, significant outbreaks have occurred in schools in multiple states.

Florida, which has reported a total of 615,806 COVID-19 cases and 11,009 deaths since the onset of the pandemic, recently confirmed that within 15 days of schools reopening, almost 9,000 new COVID-19 cases in the state have been among children. During this time, the number of children hospitalized due to COVID-19 rose from 436 to 602, and one more child died from the virus, bringing the state's total number of child deaths to eight.

Texas has reported a total of 624,513 cases and a staggering 12,439 deaths. Several districts throughout the state that have reopened have reported cases in recent weeks, including over 150 school employees in districts throughout central Texas. Burnet CISD reported three positive COVID-19 cases August 27, with eight students placed in quarantine. On August 19, Leander Independent School District announced that one of its employees at Akin Elementary School died "from complications due to COVID."

Mississippi has reported a total of 81,294 COVID-19 cases and 2,413 deaths. There have been reports of positive cases at over 720 schools in 74 of the state's 82 counties, which is 90 percent of the K-12 schools in the state that have recently opened to in-person instruction.

Biloxi High School recently reported that 15 students tested positive, placing 324 students in quarantine. The school will shift to online classes until after Labor Day. The entire fourth grade class, or 200 students, at Lafayette Upper Elementary

School has been quarantined for two weeks after one student and six fourth grade teachers tested positive for the virus last Monday.

The disastrous conditions unfolding in schools throughout the US are taking place as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Trump administration and state governments are systematically working to curtail testing and censor news of outbreaks. Recently modified testing guidelines from the CDC have dropped recommendations for all those who have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 to get tested.

The change in CDC guidelines will have immense implications and further spread the pandemic throughout schools, workplaces, homes and communities. Undermining the validity of its new guidelines, the CDC itself has estimated that 50 percent of coronavirus transmission occurs before symptoms appear, with an upper-end estimate as high as 70 percent.

The position of the Trump administration is to carry out less testing and cook the numbers in order to make it appear as if positive cases are declining.

School district and state officials are implementing additional measures to cover up the spread of COVID-19 in the schools. Citing the protection of "medical privacy," a growing number of states and school districts across the US—from Maine to Virginia, Oklahoma, California, Alabama, Pennsylvania, Georgia and Florida—are deliberately concealing COVID-19 outbreaks in reopened schools from the public.

In Florida, state officials are encouraging districts not to report cases, and Republican Governor Ron DeSantis retracted a report by his own administration showing large infections in schools that had been released to the public. DeSantis demanded the report be redacted, arguing that the school-related data was "misrepresented" to the public. DeSantis falsely claimed, "It was acting like this was something that was triggered by the school year, which is totally not true."

The Duval County Department of Health in Florida instructed schools not to publish "school specific data related to COVID-19" without its permission. As a result, the district's public dashboard of cases went static. The action by the county was taken after 24 cases were reported in the schools within the first three days of in-person instruction.

There is immense opposition to these criminal and deadly policies. The Educators' Rank-and-File Safety Committee has begun holding weekly meetings to organize this opposition and strategize a way forward. All educators, workers, students and parents who are committed to stopping the deadly reopening of schools should attend today's call-in meeting at 3:00 PM Eastern Daylight Time.

From the beginning, we have warned that the Democratic-led states and cities that have announced plans to start the school year under a fully online model would implement in-person learning as quickly as possible. The decision by some districts to start the school year fully online, worked out in conjunction with the teacher unions, is proving to be a delaying tactic to bide time to implement a full reopening.

Multiple districts in Southern California are planning to reopen schools to in-person instruction in the coming weeks and months. San Diego Unified School District recently reached a tentative agreement with the San Diego Education Association that allows for one-on-one or small group TK-5 appointments on site. Sweetwater Union High School District will be online until October 2, but will have a plan for reopening in-person instruction by September 20.

Chula Vista Elementary School District in Southern California will start mostly online August 31. However, the district is starting an in-school academic enrichment program tentatively scheduled for September 8 for the children of essential workers (including staff), and homeless and foster youth.

Detroit Public Schools, Michigan's largest school district, reached a sellout agreement Thursday with the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), which sets terms for reopening schools to in-person instruction in the coming weeks. Under this agreement, 20 percent of the student population will start the school year with face-to-face instruction. The district will maintain paltry and inadequate safety measures such as temperature checks, social distancing and mask wearing, and only certain students will be offered COVID-19 tests.

Underscoring the immense opposition to these policies, 85 percent of Detroit teachers opted for online teaching for the start of the semester until November 11. The remaining 15 percent of teachers will be required to be at school sites to teach face-to-face. This Letter of Agreement does nothing to protect the lives of teachers and students, and runs roughshod over last week's 91 percent vote in favor of holding a "safety strike." The DFT stands completely exposed as an enemy of teachers and education workers.

In Hawaii, a one-week, in-person orientation for all students and staff resulted in multiple positive cases throughout Hawaii Public Schools. The district will remain mostly online until September 21, while schools will remain open to in-person instruction for certain Special Education classes and have staff report to school sites for work. Due to a spike in cases on the island of Oahu, Governor Ige issued an emergency shutdown

throughout the island, yet the Department of Education, which includes all public schools, will remain open.

In New York City, the nation's largest school district, a hybrid model is planned for its reopening. As of this week, there are still not enough teachers signed up for online teaching to meet the needs of hundreds of thousands of students who have opted for remote learning. The plan requires each class to have one teacher for in-person and one for online instruction, causing understaffing in virtual classrooms.

Last week, United Federation of Teachers (UFT) President Michael Mulgrew said that he might call a strike if the reopened schools prove to be unsafe, i.e., after outbreaks are already confirmed.

The commonality of the two capitalist parties pervades in the drive to reopen schools. From "Red" to "Blue" states, from DeSantis to California Democratic Governor Newsom, the same murderous policies are being carried out, with the unions facilitating this process wherever they have a presence. Independent organizations of struggle must be built in each district to put an immediate stop to school reopenings.

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 today, August 29. Register today and share the event widely with your coworkers!



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