

SUNY Oneonta orders thousands of students to return home after more than 500 test positive for COVID-19

Alex Findijs
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On Thursday, the State University of New York (SUNY) at Oneonta suspended all on-campus activities after a widespread outbreak of COVID-19 on campus. In a drastic reversal of policy by the university, all classes have been transitioned to online learning for the duration of the semester.

The decision to close the campus by SUNY Chancellor Jim Malatras comes just 11 days after the start of classes. As of Thursday night, a staggering 507 people had tested positive for COVID-19, nearly 17 percent of the student body on campus.

Against the direct advice of Dr. Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, the university has ordered all students living on campus to leave the dorms by Monday and return to their homes. In other words, thousands of students, some of whom may be carrying the virus, will be traveling throughout the country back to their homes, possibly taking the virus with them.

On Monday, Dr. Fauci told NBC's "Today" show that the absolute worst thing colleges can do during coronavirus outbreaks is to send students home where they may unknowingly spread the virus to new areas of the country.

It should be said in no uncertain terms that the decision by the administration to reopen for in-person learning, under conditions in which the pandemic continues to rage unabated, was reckless and criminal.

The full extent of the consequences caused by this decision is still to be determined.

On top of the fact that hundreds of students have already become ill, it is quite likely that the reopening of SUNY has led to the spread of the virus to the surrounding communities. Now, as thousands of

students begin to pack their bags and travel home, there is no doubt that some students will unknowingly be bringing the virus home with them, leading to an increase in outbreaks throughout the country.

The case of SUNY Oneonta is just one example—though a particularly sharp one—of just how disastrous the policy of reopening of schools is to the lives of students, parents, and workers.

Prior to the outbreak, Otsego County had the lowest infection rate in the state. Now it has seen a jump from at most two positive cases per day to more than twenty. The infection rate in the county has reached 4.5 percent of those tested each day, several times greater than the 0.5 percent positivity rate of August 27.

The explosion of cases at SUNY Oneonta should stand as a sharp warning to colleges and public schools across the country which are preparing to reopen for in-person learning in the coming weeks. It is not possible to reopen schools safely while the pandemic continues to spread across the country. To do so will only lead to a resurgence of the contagion and more death.

Naturally, the SUNY system and the Democratic Party-controlled state government have refused to take responsibility for the catastrophe they created.

SUNY Oneonta President Barbara Jean Morris told the Otsego County Board of Representatives on Wednesday in a remarkable statement that: "I don't think our plan actually did fall short." She went on to say that the high viral load among students meant that "all plans would have broken down."

What a sordid excuse! Well before the opening of SUNY, there existed an immense body of scientific research showing the centrality of keeping schools closed as part of any plan to contain the pandemic.

There was and continues to be scientific data showing a drastic surge of infections among small children and adolescents throughout the course of the pandemic. Just a brief collection includes the following:

- A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) in late July concluded that the widespread closure of schools in mid-March saved at least 40,600 lives over a 16-day period and resulted in an estimated 1.37 million fewer infections over a 26-day period in the spring. Those states that closed earliest saw the largest relative reductions in infections and deaths.

- Another JAMA study released around the same time found that babies and young children infected with COVID-19 could carry high viral loads in their throats and airways—up to 100 times the amount of adults.

- The American Academy of Pediatrics and the Children’s Hospital Association released a report on August 3 which documented an extensive compilation of data from states on child COVID-19 cases. It found that while children represented only 8.8 percent of all cases in states reporting cases by age, over 338,982 had tested positive for COVID-19 since the onset of the pandemic.

- The same report noted that the overall rate for COVID-19 among children is 447 cases per 100,000 in the population. Moreover, 97,078 new child cases were reported from July 16 to July 30, *a 40 percent increase from the previous period.*

The fact of the matter is that the disaster at SUNY, like many others, was entirely predictable and preventable. Hundreds of schools and universities across the country opened for in-person learning knowing full well the dangers the policy posed to students, teachers, and faculty. They did so under direct orders from the Trump administration and with the full support of the Democratic Party.

This reality is underscored by the fact that SUNY regulations, in coordination with the Democratic state government, do not require any schools to conduct mandatory testing. Of the 64 schools in the SUNY system, only three required coronavirus testing before or upon arrival. SUNY Oneonta only *requested* that students self-isolate for at least seven days before returning to campus.

This policy is not an oversight or simply poor planning. Cuomo has referred to college students and

staff as the “canary in the coal mine.” Now he is utilizing the outbreak in Oneonta to temper the state for the horrors that are about to unfold in public schools.

Cuomo stated during a press conference that “what we’re seeing in colleges I think is going to be replicated in K-12.” Referring to the plans of public schools for reopening, he elaborated that “if they are not followed, you will see students get infected, you will see the transmission rate go up, you will see schools close. Some of that is inevitable.”

In other words, Cuomo expects large outbreaks to occur at schools and he accepts this fate as an inevitable outcome. The infections and deaths of thousands of people are of no consequence to the Democratic Governor of New York.

The claim that thousands of people must become infected and potentially die is an outrageous lie. The working class must not accept any amount of infection or any number of deaths as inevitable. The working class and youth are not test subjects or human sacrifices for the profits of capitalists.

Workers and youth must be warned: there exists no constituency within the ruling class that will fight in the interests of workers’ lives and livelihoods.

Students, educators, and school staff must organize together, independently of both big business parties and the corporate-controlled unions to oppose the deadly reopening of schools. The resources are available to provide all educators and students with high-quality technology and educational material for distance learning.

The Socialist Equality Party urges teachers, parents, and students who are concerned about the rapid spread of COVID-19 in schools, and who want to fight in defense of their lives and the lives of the students and their families should **register** for the next meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which will be held today at 3:00 PM Eastern Daylight Time, and to **join or initiate a committee** in your area.



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