

West Virginia schools return to in-person instruction

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As West Virginia public schools reopen Tuesday, September 8, all but nine of the state's 55 counties are scheduled to begin instruction in person. Thousands of teachers, staff and students will be put in danger of contracting COVID-19 and spreading it through their communities.

The counties ordered by the state Department of Education to open online-only include Kanawha around the capital city of Charleston and nearby Putnam; and Morgantown's Monongalia County. Six southern counties—Fayette, Logan, Mercer, Mingo, Monroe, and Wayne—are also included in the order. In Mingo County, the school superintendent tested positive for COVID-19 and the high school football and golf teams were exposed during practice in late August.

In Cabell County, where the state's second largest metro area of Huntington is located, schools are scheduled to start in person. The Department of Health and Human Resources' (DHHR) tracking of COVID-19 in the county does not include the student population of Marshall University, where 26 students and staff were confirmed positive with the virus in the past week. Although the campus is located in downtown Huntington, it is not being included in the area numbers or the school district considerations.

The state was the last in the US to report a case of COVID-19 back in the spring, partly due to a lag in testing. West Virginia has trailed behind surrounding states in the numbers and rate of coronavirus, a fact Republican Governor Jim Justice has touted as evidence the state will escape the worst of the pandemic.

In reality, the state's population is vulnerable to a severe outbreak. West Virginia has the third oldest population in the US, and residents are among the poorest and in worst health. Residents suffer from

obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and pulmonary diseases at high rates, making complications and death more likely from infection.

Over the weekend, the DHHR issued an updated COVID-19 map in which counties reporting fewer than 10 cases per 100,000 were considered safe to reopen the schools. The DHHR's assessment uses a seven-day trend, rather than a 14-day trend, and a color-coding to indicate whether a county can open up schools to in-person teaching after a week of downward trending cases.

Explaining the protocols, the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* reported September 5 that counties in orange or red would start schools remote only, to be reassessed over the weekend. If they are moved to yellow or green, they can reopen in person.

A one-week timeframe is insufficient to track infections, since symptoms typically take longer than a week to appear. Without knowing it, infected people can delay testing and treatment long after they've contracted the virus.

Significantly, the *Gazette-Mail* notes, "Counties that manage to get down to those colors but re-enter orange later won't be required to cease in-person instruction." In other words, if the reopening of schools results in an increase in the virus, the state intends to keep them running as normal.

West Virginia teachers waged a courageous struggle in 2018, forcing the closure of the state's schools through a wildcat strike in defiance of the unions. They struck again in 2019. However, these struggles were suppressed by the unions and the Democratic Party, with empty promises to address teachers demands for increased funding for schools and health insurance. As a result, West Virginia remains among the worst for education spending.

Now teachers and staff are being expected to report for in-person instruction without adequate protection. Personal safety has been relegated in some cases to a bottle of hand sanitizer and a mask. Many schools have no structural capacity for social distancing measures.

The lack of preparation has been coupled with intimidation and pressure from district administration, telling teachers to post only positive messages on social media “because calm is contagious.” Teachers who raise concerns are being reprimanded for violating a policy to “keep things positive.”

Last week, Morgantown saw a spike in viruses after the reopening of West Virginia University. The return of students—shown in local media reports packing into downtown bars—has bolted Monongalia County to the highest statewide infection rate outside of jails and nursing home populations. Morgantown High School administrators issued a letter to the Monongalia County school board about the danger of in-person instruction, saying they had received no direction on how to notify employees about possible exposure, and safety measures were inadequate.

In response to a flood of these concerns from across the state, West Virginia Superintendent W. Clayton Burch insisted schools have been adequately prepared using \$34 million in CARES money and that teachers were complaining without providing specifics. “They need to let us know,” he told WCHS television news September 3, “because everybody who’s asked has gotten what they need.”

Governor Justice, currently challenged for reelection, called the complaints nothing more than politically motivated “garbage” originating in the Democratic Party and the unions. Justice, a longtime high school basketball coach, expressed particular frustration that counties were canceling sports competitions where case numbers were high.

Neither the Democrats nor the Republicans have done anything about the decayed infrastructure in the state, which makes remote learning even more difficult. West Virginia has the worst broadband access and internet connectivity in the US. Only about half of the state’s public schoolchildren have access to internet at home. Even of those with connections, many lack internet speeds sufficient for online learning. Statewide, only about 2 percent of residents have fiber internet.

This predicament did not appear overnight. A handful

of companies, including Comcast and Frontier Communications, enjoy near monopoly control over service regions. Charges for basic internet approach \$100 a month, putting a strain on low-income families. Though the cable and internet companies have received grant after grant in the name of expanding access, next to nothing has been done to improve connectivity in the mountainous regions of the state.

Like everything else, the capitalist class and its political establishment are eager to use the pandemic to their advantage. On September 3, Governor Justice signed an executive order to gain access to \$766 million in federal funds earmarked for rural broadband expansion.

The architect of Justice’s plan is Mitch Carmichael—the state senator reviled by teachers for his attacks on them in 2018—a former executive at Frontier and current business development manager at rival internet provider Citynet. Carmichael was defeated in the Republican primary by an elementary school teacher.



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