COVID-19 outbreaks force switch to online learning at New Jersey schools

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Less than two weeks into the start of the school year, COVID-19 cases among educators and students have already forced the closure of several New Jersey schools. At least eight districts in the state have switched their entire district or individual schools from either full or partial in-person classes to fully remote instruction after faculty or students tested positive for the virus.

The school districts with identified outbreaks are spread throughout 5 of New Jersey's 21 counties. Chatham High School in Middlesex County sent a letter to parents on September 11 announcing the switch to all-remote learning until September 29 due to an unspecified number of cases. In Washington Township in Gloucester County, three schools had outbreaks, forcing the district to cancel hybrid instruction plans for the next two weeks.

Cases were also reported in Howell, Little Silver, Pompton Lakes, Frankford Township, East Brunswick, and Woodcliff Lake, with each district temporarily switching all schools to remote instruction or simply those schools where outbreaks occurred.

Most of the school districts intend to resume in-person instruction following a 14-day waiting period. The reckless policy is fully backed by Democratic Governor Phil Murphy, who commented to WCBS Newsradio on Tuesday, "It looks like, so far, so good, in terms of how they're reacting to the modest numbers that we're seeing so far."

Murphy played the leading role in pushing hundreds of school districts in New Jersey to re-open for in-person classes, despite grave dangers to students and educators. Educators and staff face shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE), difficulty maintaining social distancing, and outmoded heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems.

As of last week, 388 school districts received state approval to proceed with the "hybrid" instructional model, which combines in-person and remote learning, while 69 districts were approved for fully in-person re-openings. State education authorities had not approved plans to limit COVID-19 exposure for an additional 87 districts, which were nonetheless allowed to re-open.

At some of New Jersey's largest school districts that opted for fully online instruction, the resumption of remote classes has been plagued by a shortage of laptops and a lack of access to high-speed Internet. In Newark, where lessons will be online until mid-November, thousands of student laptops ordered in March have yet to arrive.

As is the case across the country, in many districts that are providing only remote instruction, teachers and other staff are still required to report to the school each day to give online lessons. At Thomas Edison Academy in Elizabeth, a custodian tested positive for coronavirus, prompting officials to close the school campus for just one day.

The chaotic and dangerous start comes after the New Jersey state government spent the summer cultivating uncertainty and anxiety among parents, teachers, and students by first delaying, then repeatedly revising, guidance for reopening schools during the pandemic. Districts were given no more than general recommendations and were advised to work out detailed plans for re-opening on their own.

Governor Murphy, a multimillionaire and former Goldman Sachs executive, initially sought to force all schools to provide in-person classes in the fall. Teachers' opposition grew rapidly, raising the prospects of mass action, with the governor responding last month by allowing districts to opt for all-remote instruction. But this maneuver was only a partial retreat. Murphy's stated goal remains the rapid re-opening of as many districts as possible with in-person instruction, in order to force parents back to work producing profits for Wall Street.

In addition, the governor made it difficult for districts to switch to remote instruction. At a recent press briefing, Murphy said, "Any resubmitted plans to begin the school year with all-remote learning must cite specific health and safety reasons for the…change, which district leaders must certify to, as well as a timeline to get to in-person instruction." Moreover, county superintendents and the state Departments of Education and Health must review districts' plans.

But the state did not release guidance about how school districts can submit their plans until August 29—less than two weeks before the official first day of school on September 8. Furthermore, the state required districts to respond within seven days of the first day of school "or as soon as practicable." More than 190 districts announced that they would provide all-remote instruction. Among these districts are New Jersey's largest

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cities, including Newark, Jersey City, Paterson, Elizabeth, and Edison.

In a report issued after New Jersey published its guidance, the New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA) estimated that the PPE, cleaning supplies, and custodial and nursing staff that districts need to re-open will cost approximately $700 million. As with every state in the US, New Jersey faces a looming budget crisis as a result of the economic devastation wrought by the pandemic, while support from the federal government has been totally insufficient.

While school districts are being starved for resources, the claim that there is no money to protect school workers and children is absurd. New Jersey is the second-wealthiest state in the country by median income, with one in 12 residents being millionaires and nine billionaires residing in the state.

The NJSBA warns that "school districts have moved forward with reopening plans designed to meet the needs of their students, but these efforts have come at a financial cost that could have negative consequences in other areas."

These "negative consequences" were revealed in Toms River, where the school district voted unanimously to lay off 240 employees, including 90 bus drivers, 70 cafeteria and playground aides, 50 cafeteria workers, 25 bus attendants, and five mechanics. The financial effects of the pandemic are only one reason for the cuts, Superintendent David M. Healy told *NJ.com*, as Toms River has lost $5.2 million in state aid and endured several annual cuts in state funding. "We've lost millions and millions of dollars each year," said Healy. These attacks on education have been carried out by a Democratic governor and a legislature controlled by the Democratic Party.

At least 20 teachers in Hammonton, located in southern New Jersey, requested to teach remotely because of concerns over their families' health. But in late August, the district abruptly denied all of these requests and declared that teachers would have to report to school buildings every day, including on days when all instruction would be given online.

On the same day the district issued its denial, it increased the daily wage for substitute teachers from $100 to $225 in an attempt to prevent a teacher shortage. Because the district does not have enough custodians, it is paying bus drivers to clean the school buildings, likely without proper supplies or adequate training.

Miranda, a special education teacher in West Milford who previously taught in Paterson for 11 years, shared her experiences with the *World Socialist Web Site*. During the summer, the West Milford school board approved a plan that entailed half-day schedules on each day but Wednesday, which would be a day of virtual instruction and deep cleaning of the schools.

Miranda recently learned that not only would teachers be required to report to school on Wednesdays, but also that the deep cleaning had been dropped in favor of traditional cleaning. "I don't understand why we were told that there was going to be this deep cleaning of these buildings," she said, adding that she was mad about the change. "Is it going to be done after hours? There's a lot of open questions here."

The West Milford Education Association, a union that is part of the New Jersey Education Association, has not provided Miranda with any guidance. Instead, she received two questionnaires about her feelings about returning to school. "That was it. There was no, 'Hey, nontenured teachers, this is what you should be doing. This is what you shouldn't say,'" said Miranda. "My older cousin and my sister-in-law also work in the district, and they told me, since I'm nontenured, to say absolutely nothing because of the volatile way that the district treats nontenured teachers."

Miranda's students have behavioral disabilities and can be defiant or aggressive. They sometimes spit and they may have problems maintaining social distancing and wearing masks. Although Miranda was told that she would receive masks, face shields, goggles, and other PPE, she has not gotten this promise in writing. "I don't know what's going to happen if one of my students tests positive," she said. "Do I have to quarantine? Am I using sick days? There's no answers for that, and it's infuriating."

Earlier this year, the principal with whom Miranda worked in Paterson died of COVID-19. "He was a healthy ox," she said, adding that she does not feel safe returning to school.

As long as the pandemic is uncontrolled, re-opening schools for any amount of in-person instruction will be unsafe in New Jersey and anywhere else. School superintendents, union leaders, and Democratic and Republican politicians alike are conspiring to force educators and students back into deadly conditions.

To ensure their safety and health, and to prevent a new wave of the pandemic among students and their communities, educators must organize independently of the unions and both political parties. The fight against the pandemic must become a fight against its root cause, capitalism, which subordinates workers' health and all other concerns to the interests of private profit. We urge all educators, parents and students to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and to begin organizing in your districts and neighborhoods for the immediate transition to fully funded online instruction.

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