

New York City resumes in-person schools as COVID-19 infections continue to rise

Alberto Escalera
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Hundreds of thousands of New York City students are returning to schools today as the country's largest school district starts its next phase of in-person instruction even as COVID-19 infections continue to rise in the city and state. The reopening order by Mayor Bill de Blasio threatens to create a catastrophe in a city where nearly 25,000 people have succumbed to the deadly disease.

Schools are opening after a week in which the Department of Education (DOE) acknowledged that teachers, support staff and students in over 100 schools have already been infected. On Sept. 21, the DOE began bringing students in 3K (full-day programs for three-year-old children), Pre-K and special education classes back into buildings. Roughly 90,000 students and teachers across 700 school buildings were ushered into schools to serve as veritable canaries in the coal mine.

The next phase includes bringing K-5 students into school buildings today, followed by middle- and high-school students, for whom in-person classes are scheduled to start on Oct. 1.

New York state's health department has announced a significant increase in the overall positivity rate from those who have been tested. Kings County (Brooklyn) nearly doubled to 2.6 percent positivity, and two ultra-orthodox Jewish communities in Rockland County, 25 miles north of the city, have positivity rates of 25 and 30 percent.

The DOE's figures obscure the true scale of the spread of the virus in schools because they refer exclusively to the number of facilities in which students or staff have tested positive and not the actual number of those infected. The same is undoubtedly true of the city and state's positivity rate.

The situation for many special education students as well as the staff who work with them is particularly hazardous. In addition to the specialized services frequently requiring close contact that many special education students receive while in school, a significant number of these children also rely on school buses to get to class. The vehicles are often under-sized and bus attendants must physically assist them while boarding and exiting buses. The upcoming fall and winter seasons pose additional risks due to the use of heating systems on buses, which could hasten the circulation of COVID-19 aerosols.

Mayor Bill de Blasio, a Democrat, initially justified reopening schools with in-person classes by referencing the

0.34 percent positivity rate within New York City. Even a week ago, this figure obscured the fact that several neighborhoods in the city, particularly in Brooklyn and Queens, had sustained positivity rates as high as six percent and others had seen recent spikes. De Blasio also ignored the fact that the positivity rate in New York State was rising and at least 20 school districts in neighboring New Jersey had recently experienced outbreaks forcing superintendents to reintroduce fully remote learning.

The arguments used by de Blasio, which have been repeatedly echoed by his backers in the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), attest to the naked disregard the corporate and political establishment has for the lives of working-class students, their parents and education workers. Even a 0.34 percent positivity rate among the roughly 550,000 students and teachers set to start in-person classes by Oct. 1 would translate to almost 1,900 infected persons within public schools.

The reckless school reopening policy in New York City has been compounded by an unprecedented level of incompetence, most notably emanating from City Hall. After months of ignoring warnings by principals that schools are facing a shortage of 10,000 teachers to implement de Blasio's hybrid learning model, the mayor abruptly changed course just four days before the previously scheduled start of in-person classes, announcing that the city would allocate resources to hire 2,500 teachers in addition to redeploying 2,000 central district staff to classrooms. A recent independent investigation of current school staffing needs actually concluded that the shortage of teachers in New York City was closer to 12,000.

When pressed last week about the city's inadequate efforts to address the teacher shortage by WNYC radio host Brian Lehrer, Mayor de Blasio's response betrayed the hypocrisy underlying the claims that the reopening of schools was being done to protect the best interests of students from working-class families.

Dismissive of the prospect that persistent staffing shortages would necessitate another delay to in-person classes, an agitated de Blasio proclaimed, "There's no reason to delay ... we are getting the people we need in place, period."

But recent reports have emerged that a significant number of the "people" to which de Blasio was referring are substitute teachers for whom the DOE has allocated an additional \$47

million. While this money could have been used to hire 600 full-time teachers, guidance counselors or social workers, the mayor and district officials decided to hire temporary workers who can quickly be fired once authorities implement their plans for savage budget cuts.

The ongoing chaos characterizing school reopening efforts was exacerbated over the weekend after rumors began circulating on social media late Friday that a deal had been struck between the mayor and the UFT to expand the number of teachers who could work remotely. The DOE did not inform principals of the agreement, which was subsequently confirmed and directly contradicted previous policy announcements issued by superintendents. The last-minute change further complicated ongoing preparations for in-person classes.

In response, the executive board of the Council of School Administrators (CSA), the union for principals and assistant principals, declared on Saturday a unanimous vote of “no confidence” for de Blasio and schools Chancellor Richard Carranza, and called for the New York State Department of Education to take over city schools, a measure that would turn over management to Governor Andrew Cuomo. The Democratic governor has overseen an equally deadly and chaotic reopening of school districts statewide and massive budget cuts.

In fact, the teacher shortage in New York City is already being felt by K–12 students who started remote instruction on Sept. 21. An increasing number of parent complaints and teacher grievances have called attention to remote classes with as many as 50 assigned students.

Staffing shortages also continue to impact health care services essential to schools. Reports of a school nurse shortage in New York City have circulated for months. In August, the DOE began frantic efforts to fill over 400 school nurse positions in order to place a minimum of one nurse in each school; a woefully inadequate target considering the many buildings that have student populations in excess of 1,000. To date, approximately 100 school nurse positions remain unfilled.

Significantly, the DOE is hiring new school nurses under temporary contracts with no employment guarantees or long-term benefits. In essence, these school nurses are “at will” employees who are receiving just four days of training before being sent into schools. Typically, school nurses receive six weeks of training before being assigned to a school.

From the perspective of the ruling class and its political representatives like Trump, de Blasio and Cuomo, workers must be forced back to work, no matter the cost in human lives, because the capitalists require them to produce the surplus value to pay down debt and resume the accumulation of profits.

Of course, neither the self-proclaimed “progressive” Democrat de Blasio nor his backers in the municipal unions have suggested that the budget shortfall be addressed by sharply increasing taxes on the obscene wealth held by the city’s parasitic financial elite, many of whom have taken to self-

quarantining within their sprawling luxury estates located in exclusive areas like the Hamptons. Rather, de Blasio is using the current \$9 billion budget shortfall to initiate further austerity measures in the city, including the projected layoff of 22,000 municipal employees.

The struggle of public school teachers is assuming a central role in the broader opposition movement against the unsafe reopening of schools as well as the back to work campaign taking place throughout the US. Education workers in the city, along with parents and students, continue to carry out walkouts, marches and other actions.

On Sunday, rank-and-file teachers at the Hunter College Campus Schools, a specialized K–12 public school administered by the City University of New York (CUNY), voted to authorize a strike to protest unsafe conditions at the school. The elite school has few windows and a long history of ventilation problems. The Hunter College Campus teachers, who are members of the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), are defying New York state’s reactionary Taylor Law, which penalizes state employees two days’ pay for every day they strike. Teachers at the school are also demanding an independent monitor to review building safety.

Earlier this month, teachers, school bus drivers and other school workers formed the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Committee to unite and coordinate the opposition to unsafe conditions, independently of the UFT and other unions. This committee and others established in Los Angeles, along with Texas, Florida and other states, are working to unite education workers across the US and indeed, internationally, with other sectors of the working class. Increasingly, education workers are arriving at the conclusion that these rank-and-file committees are the only viable means through which to mount a genuine opposition to the murderous school reopenings. We urge all educators to join our committees today.



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