

With COVID-19 rates rising, Massachusetts officials push to reopen schools and businesses

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Last Thursday marked the opening of public schools in Boston, Massachusetts, for in-person learning for high-need students, despite rising numbers of COVID-19 cases in the city and state. Despite the reservations of teachers over school building safety, the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) joined with Mayor Marty Walsh, a Democrat, to open the schools.

This is a reckless policy that coincides with Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker's order, which began Monday, for the state to move forward with Step 2, Phase 3 of its reopening plan in communities that have not been in the "red zone" (over 8 cases per 100,000) in three weeks. This permits restaurants to serve parties of up to 10 indoors and seat patrons at bars, as well as loosening restrictions on indoor gyms, libraries and performance venues, allowing for 50 percent capacity up to a maximum of 250 people.

Two epidemiologists have urged Baker, a Republican, to reconsider his reopening policies as cases and hospitalizations continue to increase across the state. While the virus has no respect for "community boundaries," it is clear that even under the previous guidelines of Step 2, Phase 2, viral transmission had been quickly spiraling out of control.

Daily COVID-19 cases in Massachusetts surpassed 700 for two consecutive days last week, and the three-day average of hospitalized COVID patients increased from 308 on September 14 to 442 on October 4. Positivity rates, which have climbed to 5.4 percent of first-tested individuals and 1.7 percent of total tests, have been steadily increasing since late August, as colleges and now public schools have reopened.

In the weeks leading up to this resurgence of cases, tactics of misrepresenting data were used by Governor Baker, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Commissioner Jeff Riley, and the

Boston Globe, among others, to push for schools to open despite knowing full well that another wave in cases was on the horizon.

An increase of new testing by private colleges—which out-tested the state, more than doubling the total number of tests given, and testing students every few days—artificially lowered the overall positivity rate, even as cases began to increase. This allowed the troubling trend of an increasing positivity rate and the slow uptick in cases to fly under the radar, and was used as a bludgeon by Walsh, Baker, Riley and other officials to push for school and other business reopenings, regardless of the increasing cases.

The artificially low positivity rate of 0.8–1.1 percent, a "key metric" used by the state, and touted by the *Globe* as the "lowest observed figure for that metric," was used as a counterweight to high absolute numbers of new cases.

Public schools will undoubtedly become a significant vector for transmission in the coming months. According to the *Globe*, between September 23 and 30, 63 students and 34 staff members who have been inside school buildings have already tested positive for COVID-19. These figures are an understatement of the real numbers, as they represent only cases reported to the state by school districts themselves, while state education officials are not tracking cases.

It was known in the very early stages of the pandemic, as well as from previous viral outbreaks, that only a comprehensive application of testing, contact tracing and social distancing measures *in combination* could effectively stop the virus. This can be seen, on the one hand, in the ineffectiveness in controlling the virus in locales that have locked down in some capacity, but invested next to nothing in testing, contact tracing and proper health care; and, on the other hand,

in the situation at the most prestigious Boston-area colleges and universities, where despite investing in new facilities, robust testing and contact tracing, social distancing is not possible due to classroom and dorm conditions.

For example, the total number of cases at Boston College (BC) stood recently at 174 out of roughly 10,000 students reportedly on campus, meaning that 1.75 percent of the population has been infected since August 16, when testing began. If this percentage were applied to Massachusetts as a whole, with a population of 6.8 million, it would translate into nearly 120,000 cases in a 45-day period. In the microcosms of schools, even those with robust testing such as BC, transmission is occurring at a rate far above the state average as a whole.

Despite these facts, schools and businesses across the state are reopening, with cases poised to explode into the thousands within weeks. Wealthy universities such as Harvard and MIT, despite possessing billions of dollars in investments, are insisting on having some type of on-campus presence in order to keep the cash flowing.

DESE Commissioner Riley, who recently sent a threatening letter to 16 Massachusetts school districts demanding that they reopen for in-person learning, said in an interview last Friday, “We’re always going to be monitoring the trajectory of the virus and the data, and while we’re still low now, even with a recent uptick, we’ll be monitoring the data throughout the year to see where we are and what [the] next steps [are].”

Riley is expecting cases to surge at schools, but pushing them to open regardless. In the interview, he reiterated the guideline that DESE recommends remote learning only for municipalities receiving a “red designation *three weeks in a row* on the color-coded metric unless other extenuating circumstances prevent in-person instruction” (emphasis added).

He said the previously mentioned weekly summary of coronavirus cases at schools should not be used to decide whether to close or reopen schools. “I don’t think this data is used for decision-making purposes,” he said. “This is really used for just transparency purposes, so families know where cases are occurring,” which means that the 63 students and 34 staff members already infected in one week of schools reopening should have no bearing on schools remaining open or

shifting to remote learning.

With 92 total cases in the state in early March, Baker called a state of emergency, the state was shut down, schools were closed, and gatherings of 10 or more people were prohibited. With no serious investments made by state and federal authorities to do what was necessary to stop the virus, the ruling elite focused instead on bailing out the banks and bolstering the stock market. A policy of “herd immunity” has been implemented, with the aim of “normalizing” the virus so that days of 700-plus cases in Massachusetts warrant no cause for alarm while schools and businesses reopen. Workers, teachers and students do not support these policies, but are being systematically lied to by the Democrats and Republicans and their supporters in the media.

Teachers, workers and students, who are being forced into unsafe environments under conditions of growing cases, must organize independently of the two big business parties and the unions that have agreed to these conditions. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is fighting to build a nationwide network of independent rank-and-file safety committees to stop these deadly policies from being implemented in every state and across the globe.

We urge you to contact us today to discuss the conditions and developments at your workplace, school and community, and to begin the process of forming a committee to unite workers across Massachusetts to stop the spread of the pandemic and save lives. Make plans to attend our next online call-in meeting at 3pm EDT this Saturday, October 10, and invite your coworkers and friends.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact