Los Angeles school district uses COVID-19 testing to accelerate back-to-school drive

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The Los Angeles Unified School District—the second largest in the country with more than 775,000 students, teachers and support staff—recently announced that it had finished its trial phase of mass coronavirus testing and would begin implementing larger scale testing in preparation for a return to in-person learning as early as November. Once completed, LAUSD is expected to become the first school district in the country to test all students and staff for COVID-19.

Underscoring the rushed and reckless character of the testing program, a pilot program involving up to 100,000 special needs children will go into effect later this month, while athletic teams will begin tryouts and practices on November 2.

Children and staff in early education and elementary schools will be the first to receive testing, with the district expanding to older students over the coming weeks. Families will be notified by their respective school principals when it's time to be tested, and results are expected to be available within 24 to 36 hours. The stated intent of the program is to establish a COVID-19 infection rate baseline and to perform a second round of testing soon after to determine changes in infection rates against the baseline result.

The district also announced it will be making use of the Microsoft "Daily Pass" app, which essentially functions like an electronic ticket on a smart phone. Using the app, only those students and staff who have been cleared as healthy will be allowed to enter school premises.

The drive to reopen Los Angeles schools is part of the larger, reckless drive to reopen the economy regardless of the consequences for the population. Los Angeles County alone has already had more than 277,000 COVID-19 cases, with 6,709 deaths as of today. Once schools are open, these numbers will rise exponentially, especially with openings occurring in the midst of the autumn and winter seasons.

It is absurd to think that an understaffed district of more than 700,000 students will be able to test its entire population on a daily, ongoing basis and somehow prevent the spread of infection on campuses.

The impacts of the virus on young students can be catastrophic and the long-term ramifications remain largely unknown, while those infected will easily transmit the virus to their older and more vulnerable family members and neighbors. Even young students can succumb to the disease, and it is highly likely that students will die as a result of the mass reopening of schools, as has happened in other parts of the country.

None of the testing claims being made by the district should be taken at face value. During the trial phase of testing, more than 33,000 tests were conducted with only 46 cases coming back positive. During the month of September, COVID-19 testing throughout the US yielded average positivity rates between 4 and 6 percent. While a positivity rate of 0.14 percent at LAUSD is not entirely out of the realm of statistical possibility, it certainly strains credulity.

The $51.3 million contract for the testing program was given to the SummerBio firm, which is contracted to deliver 100,000 tests per week through June 2021. Under the terms of the contract, SummerBio must report the results of at least 80 percent of the previous day's tests in order to get paid for that day's work.

SummerBio won the contract after a streamlined approval process in which the district set aside its Request for Proposal process that normally takes five months or longer. The panel approving the SummerBio contract included representatives from Microsoft who will also be deploying its Daily Pass app to the district.

According to the district, a significant factor in

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awarding the contract to SummerBio was the firm's use of novel robotic technologies to conduct testing, significantly decreasing costs per test versus other firms. As such new technologies have only recently been introduced, colossal and widespread testing errors are a very real possibility. It also needs to be asked whether or not the district will be transparent with the public should positive cases rise during the course of testing, as many districts and states across the US have deliberately covered up positive cases.

For its part, the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) teachers union has backed the district's drive to reopen schools and the associated testing program.

In a grotesque press release titled, "The Same Storm, but Different Boats: The Safe and Equitable Conditions for Starting LAUSD in 2020-2021," the union emphasizes that a return to school is necessary as online and distance learning negatively impacts ethnic minority students. "Vulnerable students," it states, "already facing hurdles such as structural racism, poverty, homelessness, immigration documentation issues, learning and health disabilities, and limited technology access—were disproportionately negatively impacted by the Los Angeles Unified School District's shift to crisis distance learning."

Rather than view the pandemic as a risk to all working class students and their families and demand that schools remain closed until the virus is brought fully under control with adequate, high quality, online instructional access available to all, the UTLA looks at the pandemic as an opportunity to advance reactionary racialist politics.

The union writes, "This document outlines the equity lens that we must use to view both today's emergency and tomorrow's recovery. First, we ask, *Who is suffering the most, and why?* Next, we outline current best practices that must be in place to ensure that our most vulnerable communities are helped, not hurt, by the restart of schools." [emphasis in original]

The UTLA ends the document by congratulating itself over its role in the 2019 teachers strike. In point of fact, this was a gross betrayal of Los Angeles teachers and students.

After conducting six days of closed-door meetings with city and district officials, the union only gave members two hours to review the proposed contract, which entailed pay "raises" below the rate of inflation with salary reopeners in the last two years of the contract to remove them. Reopeners for pension benefits were also included during the same period.

At the time of the strike, 33,000 teachers worked in LAUSD, a number which has since dropped precipitously to 26,500. Moreover, LAUSD is expected to lay off even more teachers in the coming months as a result of cuts in the state's 2020-2021 fiscal year budget deficit.

The district is expected to lose $500 million of its $7.5 billion budget as a result of pending state cuts. Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom has promised the cuts would be backfilled as part of $4.4 billion in federal aid expected as part of the latest proposed coronavirus stimulus relief package. However, Trump has demanded to postpone the aid package until after the election, which House leader Nancy Pelosi and the rest of the Democratic leadership have done absolutely nothing to oppose.

Last month, the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was formed to coordinate the immense opposition among LA teachers, school workers, parents and students to the homicidal campaign to reopen schools. In tandem with similar committees in cities and states across the US, we are organizing a national online meeting at 12pm PDT this Saturday to formulate a strategy to close schools, stop the spread of the pandemic and save lives. We urge all LA teachers, school workers, parents and students to make plans to attend, and share this event widely with your coworkers, family and friends.

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