

“COVID is like an active shooter in the building”

# New York state teachers describe disaster of school reopening

Sandy English  
19 October 2020

New York state has seen an increase of 18 percent in reported COVID-19 cases over the last two weeks and a four percent increase in deaths. The state and in particular, New York City, was the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring, with nearly 33,000 deaths.

Much of resurgence of infections has been driven by Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo’s decision to open primary and secondary schools in September, along with the large State University of New York (SUNY) system, which serves 1.4 million students.

For months, the Democratic Party and the media have hailed Cuomo as a sane alternative to Trump. In reality, Cuomo, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and other Democrats have implemented a variant of the deadly “herd immunity” policy promoted by Trump, albeit with the support of the teacher unions and rhetoric about the “safe reopening” of schools. This has resulted in incalculable damage to the lives and physical and mental health of teachers, parents, and students.

Last month, teachers, school bus drivers and other school employees launched the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to unite educators, independently of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), to fight the unsafe openings and to enforce safety conditions. The committee is reaching out to educators across the state to the join the fight.

Three teachers in different parts of New York state recently spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about conditions in their schools since their reopening in September. All three work in districts that implemented hybrid learning, a combination of remote and face-to-face learning.

Sandra teaches high school in Orange County, a suburban county of about 300,000 people north of New York City in the Hudson Valley region. Like nearby Rockland County, Orange County has seen massive outbreaks of the coronavirus in recent weeks. The town of Monroe, for example, which includes the Hasidic Jewish community of Palm Tree, has had recent positivity rates as high as 27 percent of those tested. The state recently shut the private religious schools in Palm Tree.

*WSWS: Tell us about conditions in your school district.*

Sandra: We were one of the few districts in our entire county that opened in early September for hybrid learning. All the other districts surrounding us stayed remote at first. We were the guinea

pigs and everybody watched us to see how it would go.

It went well in the beginning but it's all starting to crumble now. Honestly, we don't know for sure, but I believe there are almost 100 people who have been quarantined.

One teacher tested positive in my building on October 5 and the information didn't come to us until October 15. The school informed us immediately once they were given the information, but it took 10 days to get it.

I know our district leaders were concerned that if they didn't open, people would vote down our budget. But they spent an immense amount of money reopening, especially since the district reopened before anyone else did, not even knowing whether it would actually work.

Now they're short of money. They're cutting all the extracurricular activities, the things that the kids really want. They only kept the honor societies and the things that the kids would need specifically for college, publication stuff like that. Everything else has been canceled.

*WSWS: How are teachers with health problems being treated?*

Out of about 140 high school teachers, only one teacher is getting remote status. Everyone else was denied. They weren't even denied in writing, but through verbal communication with our union and only if we asked for it. Some people just didn't get a response at all.

*WSWS: What is the mental state of teachers?*

Most of us are stretched to the breaking point. I know I am. I don't have time to think about anything else other than my job because I feel like I'm doing three times the work I've always done, or maybe five times as much. So, we're stretched thin and we're exhausted. Most of us are very distrustful of anyone at this point.

*WSWS: How are your students doing?*

The kids are so upset. They come to school and basically sit six feet apart. There's very little socializing unless we have them talk to each other through the computer. They don't even sit together at lunch. Everyone's wearing masks but even within my classroom, they don't even speak to each other.

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The WSWS also spoke to Felicity from the Southern Tier of New York, which consists of six counties bordering Pennsylvania that are mostly rural and poor. Two of the counties, Chemung and

Broome, have had some of the highest positivity rates in the state for weeks. Chemung has had 286 new cases of COVID-19 in the last seven days and Broome has had 454 cases.

*WSWS: Can you describe the general situation with schools in your area?*

Felicity: We have teachers that have been quarantined because of the insane amount of spread going on in the community. The outbreak originated from a church and started the week after Labor Day. This congregation did not cooperate with the contact tracers. We had literally the lowest positivity rate in the state and now have one of the highest.

We had 145 cases from March until the beginning of September and right now we have 545 cases since September. The local college also has 130 cases, but they are not counted in our county but go to the kids' home addresses, so our infection rate is probably higher.

What's really upsetting is that several of the districts in my county did not provide the opportunities for teachers to teach remotely. One special ed teacher I know with a heart condition had a note from leading cardiologists for an exemption but was still required to teach students who cannot wear masks. He's traveling to different schools every week, being exposed to over 500 people. One building he works in has already shut down for 14 days because of COVID-19 cases.

*WSWS: Tell us what it's like to be teaching now.*

Felicity: One of my biggest concerns is the mental health of the teachers and the students. Remember, the teachers' work environment is the students' learning environment, and if the teachers are losing their minds what the heck is happening to the children?

Teachers are incredibly stressed out. I know ten women in my building that are losing their hair. When I come home from my school day, I feel like I've worked 20 hours. I'm not just tired; I am exhausted. I have never experienced the intensity of stress like this in any workplace in my life and I had some stressful jobs before I got into public education.

I don't know anybody who gets through a day without almost breaking down. The magnitude of stress at work is so enormous because you are talking about a life and death situation that you're forced to work in. You're dealing with other people's children, and you're trying to protect them.

To be honest, it's no different than having an active shooter in the building. You're doing all you can do, and you know the shooter is in the building and that he can walk in your room. This time if the shooter hits me with a bullet it doesn't just harm me. I take it home and it could harm my entire family.

*WSWS: What about the impact of distance learning on days when students are not in class?*

Felicity: Teachers were not involved in the creation of our instructional model including a Learning Management System. We have not been asked for any feedback on how the hybrid model is working. Teachers are expected to teach students at home and in the classroom simultaneously while videorecording your livestream. It's impossible. All this without any training. The children are not prepared for the use of all this technology, either, and they are stressed too.

Remote teaching is not babysitting. Teaching students all remote one day a week is another completely different model of educating students with a different set of educational challenges including living in an area with minimal internet access. Our district is supplying Wi-Fi hotspots for families who need them. All these expenses, and Cuomo continues to threaten to cut school funding.

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Melissa also teaches high school. She works in a district on Long Island, east of New York City.

*WSWS: What is the general situation for school safety?*

Melissa: It's different in each district and the way the rules are interpreted actually depends on your building.

In my building the first day of school was horrendous. There was a huge mob of people physically signing in at the main office. There was no social distancing and there was also no reason for us to physically sign in. We could have had a staggered system in place. Nothing was thoroughly thought out. What we expected to be in place, we didn't see.

We got a letter from the superintendent—and I know that other Long Island teachers also got this—that said if you get sick or you hear of anybody getting sick, due to privacy concerns, you're not allowed to talk about it. They are pressuring people to keep their mouths shut, and I don't think that's right.

They have redefined what it means to be exposed to the virus. Their definition is contact with somebody who is infected for a minimum of 10 or 15 minutes.

Basically, you're talking about a system in denial. They're going through the motions but they're not really doing anything to protect people. It's making us feel like we're crazy for even thinking that we should tell an administrator sitting a foot away from us that he or she should wear her mask.

The district posted a picture of a teacher's classroom on its website. It had four students that were 10 feet away from each other. It looked nothing like my classroom. My biggest class is 15 kids and it's pretty hard to social distance with 15 kids. They have the shields on the desks, but we didn't get anything else in the beginning of the year. We didn't even get a pair of gloves.

This is like bullying. People are very afraid and they're not sharing information with each other because they're being pressured so much about keeping everything secret. It's creating this very divided dynamic where some people know who is sick and some people don't.

*A genuine defense of the lives of teachers and students can be carried out only by rank-and-file educators themselves, oriented towards mobilizing the broadest sections of the working class in defense of lives and safety, and to put an end to the pandemic. We call on all those who agree with this fighting perspective to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.*



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