

School nurse dies from COVID-19 as officials in Baltimore–Washington region reopen schools

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Marchiel McDuffie, a school health aide who worked at an elementary-middle school in West Baltimore, died of COVID-19 on October 8. McDuffie's death comes as school systems in Democratic Party-controlled districts across the wider Washington, D.C.-Maryland-Virginia region begin to reopen despite the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic, part of a nationwide trend that has been spearheaded by the reopening of schools in New York City, the largest district in the US.

In Baltimore City, 1,000 students have already returned to designated schools for in-person instruction, including students with special needs and English language learners. By November 12, a total of 25 Baltimore schools will be open for in-person classes for these students. School district CEO Sonja Santelises announced last week that by the start of the second semester, on January 29, the city aims to open all schools for in-person learning, while allowing parents to continue to opt for online classes.

Other school districts surrounding Baltimore, including Anne Arundel and Carroll counties, have also announced plans to bring back elementary school students in October and November. In Washington D.C., all elementary schools will reopen for in-person learning on November 9, the start of the second term. Classes will consist of up to 11 students attending five days a week, with parents able to have their children continue with online learning.

Northern Virginia school districts have begun to reopen as well. Fairfax County, the largest school district in the state, began a phased-in reopening of schools last week. By the end of October, the school system plans to offer in-person instruction to at least 3.5 percent of its more than 180,000 students. Superintendent Scott Brabrand laid out a plan last week that would give parents the option to return children to all schools by February 1, while continuing to offer online classes. Loudoun County,

another Northern Virginia school district, plans to bring back thousands of kindergartners, first-graders and second-graders to classrooms in a hybrid learning model starting in late October.

The school reopenings occur as cases of coronavirus have been steadily increasing across the region. Across the three jurisdictions, new cases plateaued at roughly 900 per day in the latter half of June; however, as of yesterday, the seven-day average of new reported daily cases is up to 1,676.

Health experts have attributed small social gatherings as a major driver of the higher infections, with cooler weather forcing more people to gather indoors. Washington's Health Director, LaQuandra Nesbitt, reported last week that about a quarter of those who contracted the virus during the first week of October in the city had attended a social gathering of at least five people in the two weeks prior to getting sick. Bringing more teachers and students back to confined spaces in dilapidated and poorly ventilated schools will inevitably fuel a further surge in cases.

The death of McDuffie in Baltimore is a warning to all educators that they must take up an active struggle to close schools for their safety. More than a month prior to McDuffie's death, school health workers in Baltimore raised serious concerns about the safety of the mostly dilapidated school buildings. By early September, workers had informed their union, AFSCME Local 558, about shortages of personal protective equipment, insufficient HVAC systems and poor air circulation inside buildings. While continuing to keep their members on the job in unhealthy conditions, AFSCME stalled by filing a class action grievance on September 8, which has yet to be resolved.

In the wake of McDuffie's death, Wendy Smith, the

president of the AFSCME local, admitted to the *Baltimore Sun* that “Marchiel McDuffie did not have what she needed.” Smith added, “This was 100 percent work-related. You can’t bring people together in a pandemic, without the proper personal protection and the proper ventilating of air. They had countless interactions with people in the school buildings. This did not have to happen. This was absolutely preventable and predictable.”

As with AFSCME, the teachers’ unions are not actively opposing the reopening of schools. The Washington Teachers’ Union (WTU) is collaborating with the city on drafting safety precautions for the schools, with Democratic Mayor Muriel Bowser telling a news conference last week that the city and the union have a “large agreement on how to reopen.”

The agreement has temporarily stalled on the issue of who would be involved in verifying that schools have met agreed-upon safety criteria, while the WTU has already dropped demands for hazard pay and minimized its opposition to teachers returning to in-person learning during the pandemic.

WTU President Elizabeth Davis indicated her acceptance of the district’s claims that there are insufficient resources for adequate safety measures or pay increases, saying, “We do know that there are extenuating circumstances in regards to their budget and what they can do.” Davis added, “We want to be reasonable in our asks, and we made concessions.” Such concessions will likely lead to the deaths of school employees or their relatives.

The Baltimore Teachers Union acknowledged at an October 15 press conference that city schools are not safe. Rather than take any action to protect teachers, however, it is putting the onus on parents not to send their children back to school. Exemplifying the complete bankruptcy of these labor syndicates, BTU President Diamonte Brown told the press conference, “We are pleading with [parents] because we don’t have a choice. You all do. Parents, they are giving you a choice. You have a choice to opt in to unsafe conditions we are telling you about. If you opt in, we are forced in.”

In reality, with the Democrats and Republicans having eliminated federal unemployment benefits in late July, working-class parents are being deliberately compelled to return to work and to send their children back to school. The unions are complicit in this process, as they have not raised a finger to demand that all workers receive full pay and benefits for the duration of the pandemic.

While the unions do nothing to prevent the reopening of

schools, teachers are resisting. According to the *Washington Post*, because of massive teacher opposition to the reopening plan in Washington, nonteaching staff will supervise most of the students who return, with the students taking virtual classes at the schools.

Nationwide, there have been protests and strikes by teachers, organized almost entirely outside the unions, which have taken place on a near-weekly basis since August. Last week, teachers in Montgomery, Alabama and the West Ada School District in Idaho engaged in sickouts against school reopenings.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to a teacher in Anne Arundel County, Maryland about reopening plans there. The teacher explained, “The schools are very, very old and have poor ventilation, classrooms have no windows. The county is planning to bring back students starting November 16. They’ve given us five cotton masks and a bottle of sanitizer. That’s our ‘safety plan.’”

Noting the bipartisan nature of the nationwide push to reopen schools, the teacher added, “It’s not a matter of Democrat or Republican. Reopening is their operating plan. They’ve been underfunding schools for years. They don’t care about the community.”

Teachers, students, and parents in the Washington, D.C. region who want to fight back against the reopening of schools should join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, the only organization fighting to unify teachers, students and parents nationwide against school openings. Since the committee was formed in mid-August, eight statewide and local committees have been formed across the country.

Asked about the call by the Socialist Equality Party for the formation of rank-and-file committees, the Anne Arundel County teacher said, “This is what workers need, to unify. We all are working class.”



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