

New York City workers and students reject school reopenings through mass absenteeism

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The massive opposition of New York City parents and students to Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio's school reopening plan has found expression in high rates of absenteeism throughout the largest school district in the United States.

According to newly released attendance data, only 26 percent of the city's 1.1 million public school students are attending in-person classes. This figure represents a significant drop from the estimated 500,000 families the city Department of Education (DOE) officially counts as participating in its so-called "blended learning" models. These models bring students into school buildings between one and three days a week and are highly unsafe, exposing hundreds of thousands to possible infection from COVID-19.

This mass absenteeism does not represent an organized movement. Rather, it reflects the spontaneous repudiation by the vast majority of working class families with school-aged children of the fraudulent claim advanced by city Democrats, and supported by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), that schools can safely reopen with in-person classes in the midst of a pandemic.

Noemi Peña, a parent of a public school student, told the *New York Times*, "Parents in NYC voted and spoke with their feet." This assessment coincides with descriptions by city educators of school buildings as "ghost towns," particularly at middle and high schools.

Despite confronting mass opposition from educators, parents and students, de Blasio has doubled down on his efforts to cast New York City as a model for other large urban districts throughout the country to reopen with in-person classes. Commenting Monday on the low numbers of students showing up to school buildings, de Blasio stated, "A lot more kids could be attending in person and we want to make sure that their

families know."

These comments follow a recent media blitz in which de Blasio appeared on several news outlets last week in a cynical effort to use the city's woefully inadequate testing regime to highlight low positivity rates within city schools and push for in-person classes.

Even if one were to solely consider the 26 percent of students that are actually attending in-person classes along with the teaching staff currently reporting to school buildings, the 16,000 people currently receiving weekly tests in schools would only account for five percent of the in-person school population, well below the 10-20 percent to which the city committed. Additionally, the low positivity rate data within city schools recently touted by the Mayor omits nearly 400 DOE staff and students that tested positive before limited weekly testing began on October 9.

Significantly, school safety agents, cafeteria workers, custodial staff and bus drivers are not included in school-based testing, despite coming into regular contact with students and all other staff.

Equally revealing is the accuracy of the tests being used. According to one worker with the NYC Test & Trace Corps who recently oversaw the administration of nasal swab tests to students and school staff at a high school in Queens, the tests being used by the DOE are only 35-55 percent accurate.

De Blasio promoted these misleading statistics amid a sharp rise in infection rates, hospitalizations and deaths throughout the US and the world, as well as the resurgence of hot-spots within New York City and its surrounding areas. Forty-five schools in Brooklyn remain closed because of high positivity rates in their neighborhoods. De Blasio, nevertheless, intensified his push for students to return to school buildings on Monday with the announcement that the DOE would

initiate an opt-in period for families to switch from remote to in-person learning between November 2-15.

In an email the same day to principals announcing the opt-in window, top DOE officials made clear their intent to herd students back into unsafe schools, stating, “Superintendents, Executive Superintendents and Central DOE will begin supporting schools to ensure as many students as possible are accommodated for blended learning. We will also be sharing this information widely with families and we ask that you please share the information with families as well.”

The promotion of in-person classes has coincided with systematic efforts to undermine remote learning. Seven months after city schools initially closed in March, the DOE was forced to recognize that nearly 200,000 students remain without laptops and other equipment necessary for remote learning. Problems with internet access persist as well, particularly among the 115,000 public school students currently living in the city’s shelter system.

Many students and teachers also report remote class sizes in excess of 40 pupils, with some that reach 60 students. Recently released statistics show that only about 85 percent of students registered for remote learning are logging into virtual classes.

The pandemic cannot be contained while school buildings are opened, and education cannot proceed with inadequate, underfunded remote learning that puts intolerable pressure on educators.

The dismal attendance rates show that New York City’s working-class parents and youth have rejected the “herd immunity” program of the Democrats, Republicans, and the trade unions to force people back to work and into schools to maintain the profits of the very wealthy. The city, state and federal governments will do the bidding of the corporations and seek to force students back to school and parents back to work.

But this spontaneous movement requires conscious organization and leadership. Educators in New York City have provided a fighting program to protect the health and safety of staff and students by forming the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee independent of the unions and both big business parties. Educators, parents and students in the tri-state area who want to close the schools and fight the attacks on public education are encouraged to attend tonight’s online meeting of the New York City

Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and to send us your contact information to get involved.



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