

Oregon Governor Kate Brown allows 150,000 students to return to unsafe schools

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On October 29, Oregon's Democratic Governor Kate Brown released new guidelines for the reopening of public schools, which would allow around 25 percent of the state's students to return to classrooms in the next month. Brown's office made the announcement on the same day COVID-19 cases skyrocketed to record levels, making clear that the new guidelines have nothing to do with the safety of teachers and students.

Until now, most school districts could only reopen when the statewide test positivity rate was at 5 percent or lower, a measurement that has not been met since mid-September. Smaller districts were allowed to reopen when the number of positive cases were no more than 10 per 100,000 for three consecutive weeks, and kindergarten to third-grade classrooms could reopen with case rates of 30 per 100,000 over the same period.

These guidelines had allowed between 35,000 to 45,000 students to return to some form of in-person instruction, most of them young children and kids with special needs, according to the Oregon Department of Education (ODE).

The new guidelines eliminate the statewide positivity rate requirement and group all K-6 students together. School districts may now fully reopen with a two-week total of up to 50 cases per 100,000, and operate in a hybrid model in counties with two-week case rates of up to 100 per 100,000. If one adjusts the case-rate criteria to be compared on a one-week window, the case-rate limit has been increased by over 7.5 times from the previous standards.

With the green light from the governor, an estimated 150,000 of the state's 600,000 public school children will return to campus in some fashion. The major exception is the Portland metro area, which has maintained a relatively high rate of cases in the state given its population density.

One of Portland's counties, Multnomah County, averaged 140 cases per 100,000 over two weeks at the time of Brown's announcement. This week, state officials

announced that cases increased 46.6 percent compared to last week. As in other states across the US, Oregon is continually breaking records for positivity rates and daily case counts, in the initial stages of a potentially catastrophic third wave of the virus.

In late October, Governor Brown told news agencies in a press conference, "COVID-19 is here to stay for the foreseeable future, and most Oregon students have not been able to learn in a classroom since last March." She added, "In-person instruction is critical not only for students' educational success, but also for their health and wellbeing."

In an attempt to masquerade the new guidelines as "scientifically-based," Oregon's plans have relied on a handful of highly problematic studies that found that state schools are not significant sites of community transmission, that children transmit the virus at a lower rate than adults, and that underfunded public schools can reopen safely.

Tom Jeanne, deputy state epidemiologist, told Oregon Public Broadcasting, "We're not necessarily seeing transmission within the schools, so I think the weight of the evidence now, with protective measures in place—face coverings, physical distancing, screening for symptoms, cohorting—they're actually pretty structured environments with a lower risk of transmission than other places in the community."

The new guidelines have sparked an outpouring of opposition from educators, along with many parents and students. A former Oregon teacher, who requested anonymity, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "These new standards are not well founded, especially in a state that has an exploding infection rate. Oregon appears to be picking and choosing what research it will decide to follow."

The teacher added, "Recent data indicates a huge increase in infections in children, dating from about a

month after schools started to open in other states. Just published research indicates that communities see an uptick in infections about a month after schools opened.”

The “science” used to justify Oregon’s new guidelines shares much in common with the research promoted by the likes of Dr. Ashish K. Jha and Professor Emily Oster of Brown University, the latter of whom recently wrote an article in the *Atlantic* titled “Schools Aren’t Super-Spreaders.” Oster’s argument that schools can be safe places for kids and teachers to return to relied on limited data collected in the last two weeks of September, when most districts hadn’t yet reopened.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in a reply to Oster, “The conclusions reached by Dr. Oster should be treated with the utmost skepticism. The siloed approach of the study is not appropriate for the complex, dynamic disease transmission of COVID-19, which is spreading amid a complete lack of any coordinated governmental effort to locate the contagion at a granular level.”

In reality, public school classrooms are prime “super-spreader” locations, given the large class sizes, old infrastructure without proper ventilation, and lack of funding to provide widespread regular testing and supplies. Wherever schools have been opened, cases have increased throughout the community, even among younger children and teens. Further, dozens of teachers have died in the United States alone.

There cannot be a safe return to school under conditions when the pandemic is being allowed to spread throughout the population, without the fundamental requirements of mass testing and contact tracing.

The efforts of the Democratic Party to reopen schools as quickly as possible, claiming their plans are “based on science,” reveals their objective role as political representatives of the corporate and financial elite, who demand that kids return to schools so their parents can get back to work producing profits. These are the real interests driving school reopenings in Oregon, across the US and internationally.

Teachers and school staff are ready to fight against this plan to send them back into the classrooms at tremendous risk to themselves, their students, and the broader community. Educators have already begun to connect with one another on social media, launching media campaigns to get their voice out to the broader public and discussing sickouts, walkouts, and strikes.

These healthy initiatives will be strangled if teachers remain within the confines of the teachers’ unions, which aim to isolate educators by district and ultimately enforce

the dictates of the state government. The Oregon Education Association (OEA) has not called for any sort of serious struggle by teachers to oppose the new reopening guidelines. Instead, it has only released a statement encouraging a process that’s “thoughtful and deliberative,” and calling on state leaders to focus on reducing the community spread of COVID-19 before reopening schools to ensure that districts are not “forced to lockdown in the future.”

OEA President John Larson recently stated, “The Governor’s decision to hastily implement new, relaxed, metrics will only serve to further disrupt education for students, families, and educators throughout Oregon—allowing districts to bring students back to the classroom before it is safe to do so and increasing the likelihood that our schools and communities will again be forced to lockdown in the future.”

In opposition to the union’s empty appeals to district and state officials, Oregon educators must carry out a genuine struggle through their own means and their own organizations, refusing to let their lives be subordinated to the profit interests of the financial oligarchy.

The initiatives that teachers have already started must be developed and expanded through the formation of a statewide rank-and-file safety committee, which will serve as an independent organization that is democratically led by educators, parents and students themselves.

As educators have already done in New York City, Detroit, Los Angeles, Pennsylvania, Texas, and other areas, Oregon educators can utilize their rank-and-file safety committee to unite with other teachers, staff, parents and students across the state and country to coordinate a struggle to demand the continuation and full funding of online instruction, adequate support to both teachers and families during remote learning, and the implementation of a public health plan to get COVID-19 under control.

We encourage all teachers and education staff to contact us to learn more and get assistance in building a rank-and-file safety committee in your area!



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