Massachusetts governor pushes for in-person learning as COVID-19 cases surge

Andrew Timon
11 November 2020

As coronavirus cases continue to soar in Massachusetts, reaching over 2,000 cases per day for the first time since the heights of the first wave in the spring, Republican Governor Charlie Baker and state officials are continuing their pressure campaign to herd students and teachers back into classrooms.

In the week from October 29 to November 4, new coronavirus cases were reported in 118 Massachusetts school districts among staff and students, with nine districts reporting five or more cases. This is undoubtedly a significant undercount, as schools are not required to report these figures. Haverill Public Schools reported the most cases at 10, nine of whom are staff members.

The criminal effort to reopen schools for in-person and hybrid learning is being approached by the state on several fronts. There has been a consistent change to criteria under which school and other closings would take place, turning inadequate measures into what is becoming the deliberate culling of untold numbers of people.

The continued operation of Boston Public Schools (BPS) well beyond the previously agreed upon 4 percent city positivity rate threshold, which was quickly raised to 5 percent, is but one example of this effort. While Boston schools were forced to close October 22, there is a push to reopen them. Baker has gone a step further, declaring that schools across the state should close only as a "last resort" when there is evidence of transmission within the school. When transmission does occur within a school, it is proposed that only those classrooms where it occurred will be closed, not the entire campus.

Accompanying these state measures are changes to the metrics and methodology used to classify the level of transmission risk per district, the lowest designated as grey and increasing to green, yellow, then red. What was previously considered a red zone, at eight cases per 100,000 residents, has now been adjusted according to population size. A town with a population of 10,000 or less will now need to have over 25 cases, a rate of 250 cases per 100,000, to be deemed red. This and other changes made to the metrics dropped the number of red zone districts from 121 to 16 overnight, despite the growing number of cases.

Unscientific claims are also being advanced to justify the forced opening of schools. This includes the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) school opening guidelines, which cite flawed and limited studies to claim that schools would be safe and children would not catch or spread the virus easily.

On November 6, Baker claimed: "At this point there is clear and convincing scientific data that shows children are at significantly less risk of developing serious health issues from exposure to COVID-19, and there is clear and convincing scientific data that shows learning in a classroom, as long as people are playing by the rules, does not lead to higher transmission rates." He added that remote-only learning carries mental health risks such as depression and anxiety.

The most prominent public advocate of such claims has been Brown University economist Emily Oster, whose article, "Schools Aren't Super-Spreaders," was published last month in the *Atlantic*. Oster's results are highly flawed, using data that is limited to the last two weeks of September, involving only 200,000 children during a time when education was largely being conducted remotely and community transmission was low.

As the WSWS wrote in a revealing critique of the study on November 4:

© World Socialist Web Site

> 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. The study is analogous to a blurry, static photograph taken from a film reel. However, these are real-life situations with deadly consequences that require the utmost precision and careful analysis.

Numerous other studies, as well as common sense, point to the opposite of what is "clear" to Baker and Dr. Oster—governments and school authorities are implementing a criminal "herd immunity" policy predicated on mass infections and deaths. In Baker's case, he is justifying this policy under the guise of protecting the health of children!

A recent modeling study across 131 countries published in the *Lancet* found that when school closures were implemented, transmission rates dropped by 11, 14 and 15 percent, after seven, 14 and 28 days, respectively. After school closures were lifted, rates of transmission increased 5, 18 and then 24 percent over the same time periods. School openings caused the most dramatic increase in transmission rates, save for bans on gatherings of more than 10 people, as compared to all other non-pharmaceutical interventions, such as public transport closures, stay-at-home orders and restrictions on movement.

Another study published in the *Lancet* found that in the UK the rate of respiratory virus detection in 2020 following the nationwide lock-down, compared to the same period in 2019, dropped for all respiratory viruses, including rhinovirus. The study noted: "Around 2 weeks after the concurrent reopening of state primary and secondary schools in early September there was a sharp increase in the number of detections similar to that seen in 2019."

Baker's "science" corresponds not with the reality of the spread of COVID-19 and the safety of students and teachers, but with the profit interests of the corporate and financial oligarchy. According to the Institute for Policy Studies, between March 18 and September 15—as the pandemic raged—the wealth of 643 of America's richest billionaires rose by almost $1 trillion, from $2.95 trillion to $3.8 trillion.

Capitalist society is incapable of diverting the resources needed to fight the pandemic and address the needs of the population that are suffering under its weight. To stop the pandemic and truly address the needs of students and teachers, the working class must advance its own demands and program based on a socialist perspective. The fight against the pandemic and unsafe school conditions cannot be separated from a political struggle against the capitalist system. The initial forms of this struggle are emerging across the globe, but must be oriented politically, independent of the trade unions, the ruling class parties, and any of their "progressive" appendages.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* have been at the forefront of the struggle to build independent, rank-and-file safety committees among educators, parents and students in cities and states across the US as well as internationally. We have organized online discussions to coordinate these efforts, while publishing numerous articles on the horrific impact of school reopenings. We urge all those in Massachusetts who take science and public health seriously, and who wish to fight for the closure of schools until the pandemic is contained, to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and contact us today to get involved.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site