

New York City schools likely to close as pandemic surges

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14 November 2020

With the unyielding rise in COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations and deaths once again spreading to New York City, Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio warned on Friday of a likely suspension of in-person classes at public schools as early as next week. New York City has recently seen a sharp spike in the average positivity rate to 2.8 percent, just under the threshold of three percent set by de Blasio to trigger a switch to solely online learning.

If carried out, the suspension of in-person classes would in no way signify the abandonment of the reckless policy of herding educators and students back into unsafe schools, which has been pushed by both de Blasio and New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo. Rather, every effort would be made to ensure that a closure of schools would be temporary, including pressuring families to return to school buildings by withholding resources necessary to successfully implement remote instruction as well as limiting aid to desperate working parents forced to risk their lives in unsafe workplaces.

A shift to entirely remote classes, however temporary, faces substantial opposition within the New York City establishment, which is desperate to keep businesses and schools open after the staggering blow from the first wave of the pandemic.

The *New York Times*, the official mouthpiece of the Democratic Party, urged de Blasio to ignore the three percent positivity threshold for closing schools announced in July as a means of assuaging concerns of skeptical parents and educators. In a recent editorial advocating a pause on indoor dining, the *Times* echoed the falsifications propagated by city Democrats with respect to infections among school-aged children, cynically declaring, “Ending in-person instruction right now would be a mistake, given the evidence of how little the virus has spread there so far and the devastating consequences that would follow for academic progress as well as for working parents like subway operators and nurses.”

Both de Blasio and Cuomo, two prominent figures within the Democratic Party, have been steadfast in their opposition to reimposing lockdowns. Rather, they have attempted to legitimize the irrational “micro cluster” theory, which is premised on the increasingly debunked idea that coronavirus clusters can be contained within a given area without a general shutdown of all non-essential workplaces and schools.

Current New York City data, particularly from working class neighborhoods, clearly disproves the micro cluster theory. The daily number of positive cases in the city has exceeded 700 every day since October 30, a threshold not seen since May.

Nine of the 12 zip codes in Staten Island have a positivity rate above three percent, including the Tottenville and Great Kills neighborhoods, which now have positivity rates over five percent. Every zip code in Brooklyn has seen a significant rise in positivity rates, including the working class neighborhood of Cypress Hills/East New York, which recently overtook Borough Park as the new epicenter of infections within the borough.

Ten zip codes in Queens have positivity rates currently above three percent including several neighborhoods identified last month as hotspots. Nine zip codes in the Bronx, a borough with historically high rates of poverty, also have sustained positivity rates above three percent.

The dramatic rise in infections is even more evident in several surrounding areas that form part of the broader New York City metropolitan area. For example, New Jersey is now witnessing single-day positive case totals at levels similar to April. The city of Newark, located just across the Hudson River from New York City in Essex county, currently has an overall 19 percent positivity rate, with some neighborhoods reaching an astonishing 35 percent.

Notwithstanding the repeated claims that their policies

are guided by science, both de Blasio and Cuomo continue to ignore the growing evidence that school-aged children attending in-person classes contribute significantly to the community spread of the virus.

New data has emerged linking the recent rise in infections among school-aged children with the overall increase in the positivity rate within New York City. According to city Health Department data, the positivity rate among children under the age of four doubled during the period since the beginning of September through the end of October. By the start of November, the positivity rate for this age group, which includes Pre-K and 3K students, was 3.2 percent, a full percentage point above the overall city average.

Among children ages 13–17, the positivity rate has hovered between 2.6 and 3.9 percent in recent weeks. There is mounting evidence that the rise in infections among school-aged children is a significant contributing factor in the overall increase in coronavirus cases.

A recent American Academy of Pediatrics report underscored the dramatic rise in infections that has taken place among school-aged children. Of the total 927,000 children that have tested positive for COVID-19 in the United States since the onset of the pandemic, approximately 200,000 new cases were identified in the month of October alone.

As is the trend in general, the data on infections among children undoubtedly underestimates the true scale of the spread. Public health officials in New York City have repeatedly been forced to admit that children under 18 are the least tested age group. This is graphically evident within public schools even as Mayor de Blasio continues to carry out a deceptive campaign to use the wholly inadequate measures around testing and contact tracing to portray schools as safe from the spread of the virus. As of October 31, only 28,000 out of approximately half a million school-aged children officially enrolled in in-person classes were tested in city schools.

Despite the overwhelming evidence that the virus continues to spread unabated in New York City and its surrounding areas, de Blasio reopened 23 schools this week in areas previously designated as “red zones” by New York State. At present, twenty-two school sites in New York City remain closed. A total of 700 city schools have reported coronavirus cases in less than two months since city schools were reopened with in-person classes.

The rising rate of infections across the region, particularly among school-aged children, is a direct refutation of the previous efforts of both Cuomo and de

Blasio to scapegoat religious communities for the emergence of clusters last month. In reality, the rise in COVID-19 infections and deaths is primarily the product of the homicidal back-to-work and back-to-school policies demanded by the capitalist class and carried out by its political representatives in both big business parties.

The policies implemented by Democrats like de Blasio and Cuomo portend what workers across the United States can expect from an incoming Biden administration, should he take power on January 20.

The Biden transition team has already made clear its opposition to any national lock-down to address the pandemic. In a telling example of how the capitalist elite demands that science be subordinated to its class interests, Dr. Michael Osterholm, who was named this week to Biden’s 13-member pandemic advisory board, was forced to walk back his previous support for a nationwide lockdown.

The inability of the Democrats and their backers in the trade unions to propose even a moderately progressive response to the situation confronting educators makes the independent intervention of the working class more urgent than ever. Towards this end, we urge all education workers, along with students and parents, to form rank-and-file safety committees.

These committees must serve as the means for mobilizing the independent strength of the working class, including for a nationwide general strike to immediately close all schools and nonessential businesses while guaranteeing full income protection for all those affected. All those who wish to take up such a struggle should join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.



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