

New York Governor Cuomo keeps schools open despite rising COVID-19 positivity rate

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The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will be holding its weekly meeting on Wednesday, November 18, at 8:00pm EST. We will discuss a strategy to fight for the closure of all schools and nonessential businesses to stop the spread of the pandemic. To register to attend the meeting, click here.

New York's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo is doubling down on efforts to block any suspension of in-person classes even as the COVID-19 pandemic once again spirals out of control in the state that was the epicenter of the virus last spring. On Tuesday, there were 2,124 people being treated for COVID-19 statewide, the highest number since early June.

Interviewed by MSNBC over the weekend about the anticipated closure of New York City public schools, Cuomo made the fraudulent argument that schools are not a significant factor contributing to the current rise in infections and should remain open with in-person classes. Cuomo stated that the city should rethink the previously set seven-day rolling average positivity rate threshold of three percent to trigger the suspension of in-person classes.

Schools will remain open in the city on Wednesday despite the positivity rate reaching 3.2 percent Tuesday, with the latest data showing a 2.74 percent seven-day rolling average infection rate in the city.

During the interview, Cuomo repeatedly referred to the three percent rate as too low of a threshold, comparing it to 80 percent of states throughout the country where positivity rates currently exceed that level, while neglecting the fact that it is in those same areas that hospitalizations and deaths are skyrocketing. Throughout the rest of New York, Cuomo has set a positivity rate of nine percent to trigger a suspension of in-person classes for K-12 students.

In subsequent comments, Cuomo urged comparing positivity rates in schools to the rates within the surrounding community to determine whether to suspend in-person classes. Both Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, also a Democrat, have repeatedly cited dubious data reflecting low positivity rates in schools in an attempt to portray them as both safe and insignificant vectors in the community spread of the virus.

Media have speculated on the possibility that the United

Federation of Teachers (UFT) and de Blasio may seek to keep the schools open even if the seven-day rolling average positivity rate passes three percent. In a press conference Tuesday, de Blasio took a defensive stance on the standard to close schools, declaring, "No one is saying it's perfect, but we have to set standards. The three percent standard was out of an abundance of caution—and we stated it as such."

However, the low infection rates within schools being cited by both Cuomo and de Blasio must be understood in the context of a general wave of student absenteeism, which reflects the wariness of parents and children with respect to a return to unsafe buildings. Further, the vast majority of students that have returned for in-person instruction are not being tested regularly, resulting in a statistically insignificant sample size and a tendency to conflate the incidence of infection among adults with that of children.

As of the beginning of November, only 28,000 of the approximately half million students registered for "blended learning" had been tested since starting in-person classes in September. Currently, only 15 percent of students have signed consent forms to be tested.

The total testing sample taken from city schools significantly over-represents teachers, who are being tested more frequently, relative to students. According to a recent statistical analysis conducted by a rank-and-file educator in New York City, the over-representation of adults relative to students in the testing sample pool is taking place at roughly a 2:1 ratio.

Both Cuomo and de Blasio are using the presumed cautious behavior of teachers combined with low student attendance rates to repeatedly test the former and thereby make the fraudulent case that the lower instances of infections within schools relative to the broader community make them safe havens for in-person learning.

This deceptive practice is not limited to New York City. The Suffolk County Department of Health on Long Island recently adjusted both its testing protocols and criteria for determining the suspension of in-person classes. Effective November 16, twenty percent of school staff and students in schools located within "yellow zones" will be tested and campuses will remain fully open as long as their positivity rate remains lower than that of the surrounding community.

Cuomo has also reiterated the false claim that there has been a “tremendous amount of testing in schools.” This is a patent lie that stands in stark contradiction to declarations by many health officials, including spokespersons from the New York City Department of Health, who were recently forced to admit that “children under 18 are tested the least of any age group.”

Epidemiologists have issued repeated warnings that as infections are rising nationwide, there remains a lack of aggressive and consistent testing among all age groups. According to Marc Lipsitch, a professor of epidemiology at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, “If we really wanted to get things under control, frequent testing of almost everybody would be one way to do it and we’re, of course, nowhere near that. We’re doing infrequent testing of almost no one.”

The widespread emergence of confirmed cases across New York City schools, even under conditions of inadequate testing practices carried out by the city coupled with the mass boycott of in-person classes, belies the fraudulent narrative being promoted by the Democrats and the media. Despite only 25 percent of students having attended in-person classes since September, nearly half of New York City public schools have reported infections.

The only factor currently mitigating a more severe outbreak of infections and deaths among teachers and students in New York City schools has been the de facto boycott of in-person classes of by the majority of parents and students.

As the US continues to break records and the positivity rate in New York City fast approaches three percent, intense pressure from the ruling elite is bearing down on de Blasio to keep the schools open. Last week, the *New York Times* openly urged de Blasio to renege on his previous commitment to suspend in-person classes at the three percent positivity threshold.

Even more significant has been the complete unwillingness of the UFT to respond to, let alone mention, the growing calls to disregard the previously set threshold to suspend in-person classes. When asked last week about the impact of the sharp rise in infections on schools, UFT President Michael Mulgrew issued no denunciation of those openly advocating to keep schools open, much less a warning to educators to prepare for the real possibility that de Blasio will renege on his previous commitment.

Instead, Mulgrew attempted to downplay the immediate threat to educators, children and their families by diverting discussion to the issue of technology. In response to questions about the closure of schools from a local cable news channel last week, Mulgrew stated, “My concern really is the technology piece. I don’t want parents and students getting the run-around. I’m hoping the city has taken seriously what we’ve been saying, and what parents have been saying, about real technology support.”

In contrast, New York City educators have raised the alarm about the danger of keeping the schools open, both on social

media and through discussions with coworkers and the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

One educator took to Twitter to denounce the UFT, writing, “Do not down play the virus in schools. My school has shut down 3 different days already for a deep cleaning; I already had to quarantine for 2 weeks. We have had many positive cases for both students and teachers. Believe the main sources; us in the trenches not those outside.”

Another asked, “Why is @NYGovCuomo on tv this morning claiming that schools in NYC are safe places & have lower transmission rates than the surrounding communities when we know sufficient testing isn’t being done in schools. These are lies.”

A third teacher addressed the *New York Times*: “But [it’s] safe, right @nytimes? Just shut up and teach, right @nytimes?”

A high school teacher in Manhattan told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “This fantasy that educating students is more important than the people risking their lives for it is ludicrous. No teacher should have to risk their lives and the lives of their own families to teach the children of other families. Keeping schools open now is a game of Russian roulette that no one should be asked to play.”

The coming days represent a critical juncture in the struggle of educators to oppose the homicidal policy of in-person classes being carried out by both Democrats and Republicans, and supported by their backers in the teachers unions and the corporate media.

The formation of rank-and-file safety committees is the only viable means for teachers and education workers to conduct a genuine struggle in defense of their lives. These committees must fight to mobilize the independent strength of the working class, including preparations for a nationwide general strike, to immediately end all in-person learning and close nonessential businesses while guaranteeing full income protection for all those affected. We urge all educators, parents and students who wish to take up such a struggle to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.



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