

Chaotic move to online learning designed to facilitate reopening of New York City schools

Alberto Escalera
20 November 2020

The New York metropolitan area is in the midst of a dramatic rise in COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations, and health officials have warned of an imminent surge in deaths in the coming weeks.

As of Wednesday, when Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio announced the temporary suspension of in-person classes for all public schools, the average number of daily new cases has consistently surpassed 1,200. This is well above the threshold of 550 new cases previously identified as a harbinger of an exponential spread of the virus. Brooklyn and Queens continue to be the most impacted areas of the city, while Staten Island has seen a sharp rise in infections in recent weeks.

On Nov. 18, the number of COVID-19-related hospitalizations in New York City stood at 746, more than double the amount registered in early October. The number of ICU beds needed for COVID-19 patients has also risen steadily.

When in-person instruction was suspended on Wednesday, 126 school buildings were already closed due to positive cases. According to Department of Education (DOE) data, there have been over 2,000 teachers and students confirmed to have been infected with COVID-19.

This data, which in itself disproves the myth advanced by the *New York Times* and the rest of the bourgeois media that schools are safe from the spread of the virus, must be understood in the context of an unprecedented wave of student absenteeism.

Only 28 percent of public school students in New York City have attended school at least one day since the start of the school year. Last week, as the city steadily approached the three percent positivity rate triggering the suspension of in-person classes, DOE officials were increasingly pressuring schools to convince the parents of students enrolled in blended models to return to school buildings, as only half of them have actually done so.

The chaotic nature of the immediate switch to online learning was by no means unintentional. Rather, the sudden announcement that school buildings would be shuttered

effective Thursday was timed to maximize the disruption for parents that had been forced to continue working. Neither de Blasio nor the DOE made any serious preparations for a transition to effective, fully remote instruction even as the rising positivity rate continued its predictable trajectory.

Nine months after city schools were forced to end in-person classes during the initial upsurge of the pandemic in March, tens of thousands of students remain without reliable internet access, in addition to the 115,000 school-aged children living in the city's shelter system where cell phone service is notoriously unreliable and Wi-Fi virtually non-existent. Even moderate proposals, such as having the city pay telecommunications companies to guarantee Wi-Fi service for needy families at an estimated cost of \$30 million for the year, have been ignored while a project to provide Wi-Fi service to city housing shelters will not be completed until July of 2021.

Nearly 80,000 public school students have been left without a proper device for remote learning. Last week, the DOE informed the city council that it only recently ordered an additional 100,000 cellular-enabled iPads. However, these devices are not expected to arrive until mid-December. Thousands of public school students that have already received similar devices, which often serve as Wi-Fi hot-spots for entire families, are reporting problems related to unreliable internet connectivity.

Though it has received much less media attention of late, critical staffing shortages continue, particularly within teaching and critical support staff positions such as guidance counselors and school social workers.

In an effort to convince parents to sign up for blended learning models, de Blasio announced over the summer that the DOE would hire an additional 4,500 teachers. However, no systems were put into place to process and train newly hired staff. As of November, many teaching and other support positions remain unfilled as remote classes increasingly exceed 34 students, while families devastated by the economic and social impact of the pandemic are left without supports for school-aged children. According to the

New York State DOE, which must certify all prospective hires in New York City, there is currently a 16-week wait for a certification review to be hired.

The withholding of resources necessary to ensure safe and effective remote learning, including the denial of direct aid to all parents so that they can stay at home and support their children, is a calculated policy designed to intensify the pressure on working parents to acquiesce amid the growing calls for an immediate return to in-person classes.

New York City has the largest school district in the country, and sets a precedent for all other districts. Due to this strategic importance, the bourgeois media have engaged in a frenzied campaign denouncing the suspension of in-person classes while repeating fraudulent claims that schools are not significant vectors for the transmission of the virus.

On Wednesday night, CNN host Chris Cuomo, the brother of New York's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo, went on a hysterical tirade in which he railed against the suspension of in-person classes in New York City. He repeatedly cited deceptive data related to low infections within city schools when compared to the city as whole.

As the WSWS has noted, the relatively low positivity rate in New York City public schools is the result of inadequate testing and the hitherto unorganized, yet massive, boycott of in-person learning by students.

Perhaps the most egregious example of deliberate falsification with regards to in-person learning came on Thursday from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Robert Redfield, who claimed without any evidence, "The infections that we've identified in schools, when they've been evaluated, were not acquired in schools. They were actually acquired in the community and in the household."

Redfield added, "I'm here to say clearly: The data strongly supports that K-12 schools, as well as institutes of higher learning, really are not where we're having our challenges. And it would be counterproductive, from my point of view—from a public health point of view—just in containing the epidemic, if there was an emotional response to say, 'Let's close the schools.'"

Judging from Redfield's comments, one would think that public schools in America are healthful oases where children thrive and COVID-19 is powerless. In reality, over 188,000 students and educators have officially been infected with the virus in dilapidated K-12 schools across the US, and there are over 100,000 confirmed cases on college campuses. The reopening of schools has been a primary factor in the resurgence of the pandemic this fall, resulting in over one million children becoming infected with the virus.

Significantly, the team for the incoming Biden administration has rejected all talk of a national lock-down,

while perpetuating the same lie as the Trump administration that schools can safely reopen or remain open with increased testing and mask requirements. Recent experience under Democratic state and local administrations, such as New York, reveal no fundamental difference between both capitalist parties with respect to keeping schools and workplaces open, with both parties thoroughly implicated in the homicidal policy of herd immunity.

In implementing these policies, the Democrats have the fulsome support of the unions. Despite the staggering rise in infections across the region, the teachers unions are working to reopen schools as quickly as possible, with United Federation of Teachers (UFT) President Michael Mulgrew declaring on CBS News Thursday, "This is very frustrating because we are the ones who worked hard to get our school system open."

Mulgrew signaled his readiness to immediately begin discussing reopening schools, saying, "I believe there should be a geographic approach, not a citywide approach. I'm hoping now that as long as we can keep this virus down, I'm hoping that between Thanksgiving and Christmas we plateau and push it back down, because if we get up to six or seven percent [test positivity rate], this whole conversation [on reopening schools] is moot."

As one New York City educator told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We all feel like we've been thrown to the wolves by the mayor and the union."

The struggle of educators in New York City to prevent the planned reopening of schools while the pandemic rages, and to fight for all resources necessary for teachers and students to safely and effectively carry out remote instruction, can only be conducted independently of the Republicans and Democrats, as well as their media mouthpieces and lackeys in the unions.

The immediate task confronting educators is the formation and strengthening of an interconnected network of 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 end all in-person classes and close nonessential businesses while guaranteeing full income protection for all those affected. We urge all education workers, students and parents who wish to take up such a struggle to join the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact