

San Diego schools continue to reopen as California surpasses 1 million COVID-19 cases

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In recent weeks, California passed the grim milestone of having over 1 million COVID-19 cases, and the state has recorded 18,555 deaths. The statewide test positivity rate currently stands at 5.2 percent, with the majority of counties reporting a positivity rate well over 8 percent. Within the last week, 28 counties throughout the state were added to the most restrictive “purple” tier, placing 41 out of 55 counties in the worst category for COVID-19 case counts, which is reached when the positivity rate surpasses 8 percent.

The surge in cases throughout California is part of a nationwide and international explosion in cases and deaths. The United States now has a total of 12,225,857 COVID-19 cases and 259,843 deaths. According to data from the American Academy of Pediatrics, more than 1 million children have tested positive for coronavirus, disproving the arguments advanced by the bourgeois press and politicians who argue schools are not hotbeds for spreading the virus. Such grim statistics are likely much higher due to the large number of asymptomatic cases that go untested and unreported.

In response to the extreme rise in cases, California’s Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom said in a statement Monday that he was pulling the “emergency brake” on the state’s “Blueprint for a Safer Economy” and will reinstate broad restrictions across much of the state.

“We are sounding the alarm,” Newsom said in the statement, adding, “California is experiencing the fastest increase in cases we have seen yet—faster than what we experienced at the outset of the pandemic or even this summer. The spread of COVID-19, if left unchecked, could quickly overwhelm our health care system and lead to catastrophic outcomes.”

In reality, Newsom is advancing the position of the Democratic party, which refuses to carry out lockdowns and closures of schools and non-essential businesses. Newsom’s herd-immunity policies are geared toward keeping businesses open and production flowing, prioritizing profits over workers’ lives.

Despite the fact that 94 percent of state residents live in counties in the most restrictive tier, schools, factories and other workplaces are being kept open. Newsom’s “emergency brake” measures have so far amounted to a mask mandate, citations for businesses that do not meet the required restrictions, and a possible curfew. Such measures provide no real mitigation of the virus on their own

and leave millions of workers and their families to confront contracting the illness at work or school.

Schools that have already reopened will not be subject to closures and will be allowed to continue their reopening plans, many of which are already operating under full in-person instruction for all students.

The regulations given to “purple” counties declare that all K-12 schools that were fully online cannot offer in-person instruction while the county remains purple. However, if a school currently offers in-person instruction, even if it is for a small group or limited number of students, the school is not only allowed to maintain in-person classes, but is granted the ability to expand operations, meaning school districts throughout the state will continue with their plans to allow all students onto campuses, and resume close-to-normal operations. Many of the districts that will remain open are in communities with the highest infection rates.

Last month, San Diego teachers and students established the San Diego Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in opposition to the dangerous reopening of schools to in-person instruction throughout San Diego County. Among the demands we issued in our founding statement were for an immediate halt to all in-person and hybrid instruction for K-12 schools and colleges, full funding for online instruction so that schools can remain online, and the redistribution of CARES Act funds used to bail out Wall Street to instead provide the working class with all the resources needed during the pandemic.

In San Diego County, COVID-19 cases are surging as cumulative totals reach 68,203 cases and 952 deaths. The county reported 1,087 new cases last Saturday, breaking its single-day record for new cases. In the week since, numbers have remained three times higher than the number of average daily new cases in October. COVID-19 hospitalizations have also increased by 27 percent during the weeks of October 25 to November 7, and public health officials anticipate cases and hospitalizations to continue to rise.

The majority of school districts, at least 27 out of 42 in the county, were open to in-person instruction under a full or limited capacity prior to San Diego County moving into the purple tier last week and will remain open as cases continue to rise. According to the San Diego County Office of Education dashboard, at least 28,654 students now attend schools fully in-person, 122,177 attend in-

person under a hybrid model, and 31,691 staff are present on public school campuses throughout the county.

Last Tuesday, three schools in the **Vista Unified School District** (VUSD) closed and returned to fully virtual learning after positive cases were reported at Rancho Buena Vista High School, Vista Magnet Middle School and Madison Middle School. These three schools have notified the public that in-person instruction at the campuses will resume November 30.

VUSD, located in north San Diego County and serving more than 25,000 students, is one of the first districts in the county to have opened for fully in-person instruction last month. The most recent reported data from November 11 shows the case rate in Vista at 15.1 percent. According to the district, there have been 31 reported positive cases on school campuses since reopening October 20. Despite an increase in cases within the district and a surging positivity rate throughout the community, the district insists on remaining open.

San Diego County's three largest districts—San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD), Poway Unified School District (PUSD), and Sweetwater Union High School District (SUHSD)—were open under a limited capacity prior to the county's purple tier designation and are allowed to keep campuses open for in-person instruction.

San Diego Unified School District, the county's largest school district with over 100,000 students, has been providing small group in-person sessions for students with high needs since October 13. The district is currently in "Phase One" of its reopening plan and will continue offering in-person sessions for at least 4,000 students. The district will expand into "Phase Two" of its reopening plan in January by opening its elementary and secondary campuses to a hybrid learning model.

SDUSD superintendent Cindy Marten revealed a "National Education Recovery" plan this week calling for a robust testing program, which will be utilized to provide a political cover for further school reopenings in collaboration with the unions.

Poway Unified School District, the second largest in the county, reopened all 39 campuses last month for limited in-person instruction. In a recent statement responding to the county moving into the purple tier, PUSD Chief Communications Officer Christine Paik stated, "We are considered open and we can continue with our reopening." She added, "Even if you're only open for part of the population now, eventually if you want to reopen for all of the students who want to come back in-person, you can and that's our plan." According to the district COVID-19 dashboard, there have been at least 22 reported positive cases among students so far this month.

Sweetwater Union High School District, the county's third largest district with 40,000 students, has been providing small group in-person sessions on campuses since earlier this month. Due to an excess of Title I funding from the CARES Act that the district must spend by December 31, schools are opening up their campuses for tutoring where students attend their online classes at school and receive assistance from a teacher. Teachers were asked to recommend students who are struggling in their classes to be placed in the in-person tutoring program. According to the district website, there are 790 students and 729 staff currently on

campuses throughout the week.

SUHSD is located in the South Bay of San Diego County along the border between San Diego and Tijuana, Mexico, which contains some of the highest infection rates in the county. The latest data shows that the community of San Ysidro had a recent seven-day average case rate of 25.3 percent. San Diego County data reports that in the communities of San Ysidro and Otay Mesa an estimated one in five people may be currently battling the virus.

Sweetwater teachers have expressed opposition to the recent move by SUHSD to offer in-person tutoring and after-school programs.

Responding to the district's sudden move to provide in-person tutoring, Jake, a special education teacher, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "The district is preparing for a return to in-person teaching. If no one gets sick during this pilot program, then the district will use this as justification for a full return. Early in the school semester, the district sent a survey asking teachers if they would be interested in returning back to the classroom, and a resounding majority refused to return to the classroom."

John, also a special education teacher, shared his response to a staff e-mail that asked for teachers to recommend students to attend in-person tutoring. He said, "These kids will now be exposed to a more dangerous environment than need be and may be exposed to a deadly virus. I for one will grade accordingly from now on. Per my beliefs, I do understand academic progress this year is of paramount importance, but I do not morally agree with identifying students who are struggling knowing that they will be 'allowed the opportunity to volunteer,' to participate in a small group environment, where they are receiving support but are also being exposed and exposing staff members to a potentially life-altering virus.

"I will be changing my policies on leniency for late and missing assignments. Personally I am willing to take the brunt of 'being talked to' or having my records reviewed, if it comes to that, but I sleep better knowing I'm helping to foster community and keep people safe in a time when we are all in need of a helping hand. The reality is that no students from K to 12th grade will be fully meeting their potential or at grade level, in this district or elsewhere during this time of distance learning."

During this unprecedented pandemic and economic catastrophe, workers and youth must take the fight for their safety into their own hands by building workplace and community rank-and-file safety committees. We urge all educators, parents and students in San Diego to join the San Diego Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which is fighting against the dangerous reopening of schools.



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