

New York City educators denounce plans to reopen schools

Sandy English
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As COVID-19 positivity rates increase in New York City and across the state, educators and parents have reacted with outrage to Sunday's announcement by the mayor, Democrat Bill de Blasio, that public schools in the largest district in the United States would reopen next week.

One Brooklyn high school teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Reopening on December 7 with case numbers and positivity rates already spiking and expected to go exponential as a result of holiday get-togethers shows just how little de Blasio and the elites pressuring him care about the lives and safety of students, students' families or school staff."

In the most recent development, New York's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo, announced Monday that rising positivity rates throughout the state had prompted him to order hospitals to prepare for an influx of COVID-19 patients. "If those numbers increase, which we expect they will, you will see serious stress on the hospital system," Cuomo told a press conference.

At the same time, Cuomo took measures to ensure that the stress on hospitals would increase by relaxing testing and school closing guidelines in areas of the state designated as Orange Warning Zones, all of which currently have positivity rates at or above 4.48 percent. Schools in those zones no longer have to close for four days after an Orange Zone designation and students no longer have to test negative before attending in-person class.

De Blasio shut schools on November 19, in line with an agreement made in August with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), because the weekly rolling average of positive COVID-19 tests had reached three percent citywide. The three percent threshold was an expediency made to placate rank-and-file teachers who had shut down the city school system by threats of sickouts and strikes in March at the outset of the pandemic.

Under the new phased reopening plan, there will now be no citywide positivity threshold at all. The school system will stay open permanently, regardless of the severity of the pandemic. Most significantly, de Blasio said that he is now

seeking to begin daily in-person instruction, abandoning the hybrid model.

Students in pre-K to 5th grade will return on December 7, followed by special education students on December 10, while high school students are slated to return next year. Twenty percent of students will be tested weekly, and students may not enter a school building without a signed note of permission. Before schools closed in November, over 70 percent of students did not attend physical classes, a de facto boycott by parents and students. *The New York Times*, which has spearheaded the campaign to open schools, fully endorsed de Blasio's plan. On Sunday, Eliza Shapiro, the *Times*' main education reporter and a proponent of opening the schools, said. "Reopening, despite its many issues, was a major milestone in the city's long path to recovery—and the closing of the schools less than eight weeks later was a blow."

The UFT has played a scurrilous role and is once again implicated in facilitating the homicidal opening of schools amid a raging pandemic. Without bothering to tell its membership that it has overridden the agreement to close schools when the citywide positivity rate reached three percent, the UFT now endorses de Blasio's plan.

The UFT's Twitter feed quoted its President Michael Mulgrew as saying, "we are supportive of a phased reopening of schools in other neighborhoods as long as stringent testing is in place."

MORE-UFT, the pseudo-left faction of the UFT associated with the United Congress of Rank-and-File Educators, issued a statement denouncing the "inequity" of de Blasio's decision. Framing the issue in racial terms, they wrote, "The Mayors proposed new plan disproportionately benefits white students."

As positivity rates are skyrocketing throughout the region, MORE-UFT suggested that "The safe choice would be to wait until January to consider reopening school buildings," while "applauding" de Blasio's mandate that students and staff complete testing consent forms. MORE-UFT issued no call for industrial action by educators or for a general strike

to stop the community spread of the virus.

In contrast, the reaction of New York teachers on social media was quick and severe, indicating the growing radicalization of the entire working class. One teacher tweeted: “I absolutely REFUSE to return to school with DOUBLE the number of students without EVERY SINGLE CHILD AND ADULT BEING TESTED ON A WEEKLY BASIS. Your ‘20%’ of every school being ‘tested’ DOES NOT CUT IT IN ANY WAY SHAPE OR FORM.”

Another educator tweeted, “The mayor & Gov’nor failed miserably 2x @ reopening NYC schools. So they’ve doubled down 4 a 3rd time with our lives, hoping 4 some level of success in their next imminent failure. Gee, it must be great to gamble & loose, when U don’t have to pay w/ur own life.”

Another educator tweeted succinctly: “It’s time to strike!”

One educator commented on Facebook, “This ‘school is safe’ narrative presents schools as some magically isolated bubble. Once schools open, the number of contacts for EVERYONE grows exponentially—especially in a place like NYC, densely crowded with most of us dependent on mass transit. A LOT of faculty and staff have to commute to schools, as do many children.”

A colleague responded: “Exactly. And the governor knows this. His condescending follow-the-science crap is transparent. And deadly.”

Another teacher expressed the widespread sentiment of educators about the trade unions, writing, “After what we’ve been through since March, I think there should be a massive culling of the unions statewide. It’s clear that our best interests aren’t being taken seriously. The “do it for the kids” mentality is a detriment to our health, safety, profession, and livelihood. If the economy really does depend on the schools then we need contracts, salaries, and representation that reflects that.”

The WSWs interviewed several teachers about de Blasio’s reopening plan. An English as a New Language teacher in Queens stated, “I am so confused in regards to the Mayor’s decision to open up schools as the numbers continue to rise well over 3 percent. There will be less than two weeks of instruction before the next holiday break. Returning on December 7 following Thanksgiving celebrations will only put the whole school community at higher risk for infection.

“We still have 40-degree classrooms with no heat because our only form of ventilation is to have the windows open. How is that putting children first?”

Another longtime city teacher told the WSWs: “Of course I am appalled, disgusted, anxious, worried. I know so many teachers struggling with this right now. The priorities of those in power are obviously all wrong. People are being

manipulated and many don’t even realize it. I really can’t complain personally because I am safe at the moment, working from home, but it upsets me to see others put at risk. It ultimately puts us all at risk as it spreads throughout the community.

“Parents, desperate for childcare, are pushing for schools to stay open because they need to feed their children and pay rent. A more humane government would be subsidizing these families right now instead of pouring obscene amounts of money into the military industrial complex and tax breaks for the wealthy. We have money to kill people but no money to take care of people in the midst of a pandemic.

“This nonsense about how it’s not being transmitted in school is just another manipulative lie. The point is not so much where kids are getting it but the fact that they’re bringing it to school and spreading it, putting so many in danger. To open those old, decrepit school buildings right now, with winter and holidays approaching, is absolutely criminal. What happens there ripples out to the surrounding areas and beyond.”

To halt the drive to reopen New York City schools, teachers and all education workers must build their own, independent rank-and-file safety committees, separate from and opposed to the unions, in every school and neighborhood. The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was founded in the lead-up to the initial campaign to reopen the city’s schools, and we have been the foremost fighters in defense of the safety and lives of educators, parents and students, demanding the closure of all schools and the full provision of the resources necessary for high-quality remote learning.

All New York and tri-state area teachers who want to fight the spread of the pandemic and organize actions to close the schools should attend the next meeting of our committee on Wednesday. Sign up today to get involved.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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