

Los Angeles school district plans full reopening as COVID-19 outbreaks mount in schools

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Like nearly all other major metropolitan regions across the United States, coronavirus cases in Los Angeles have skyrocketed over the past month. There are now over 4,000 new cases per day in Los Angeles County, a quadrupling of cases over the same time period in October. The county is already on track to run out of hospital beds within the next two to three weeks.

This reflects statewide trends, prompting California's Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom to announce Monday that the state is on the brink of more extensive stay-at-home orders. More than 75 percent of the state's 7,533 ICU beds are now occupied and 51 of the state's 58 counties are now in the "purple" tier, indicating widespread infections with test positivity rates higher than 8 percent. The remaining seven counties are mostly in the sparsely-populated Sierra Nevada mountain regions.

Los Angeles County, which is the largest county in the US by population, issued the most stringent stay-at-home orders in the state Monday to deal with rising infections. Yet even these measures are wholly inadequate, allowing most businesses and workplaces to remain open but only at reduced capacities. The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department also announced that even these provisions will not be enforced and instead rely on voluntary compliance.

Prior to the latest upsurge in cases and hospitalizations, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) was poised to reopen schools for in-person learning in November despite the already immense risks at the time. The district had laid out a plan to regularly test students and had partnered with Microsoft to make use of its newly-created "Daily Pass" app to clear students for campus entry.

While plans for a full reopening have not yet been implemented, athletic training has already begun at a small number of campuses, while many campuses have already partially reopened to a limited number of students for tutoring and for hybrid models of learning, producing a surge in coronavirus infections.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported last week that 263, or nearly all of the partially reopened schools in Los Angeles County, had experienced coronavirus infections during the current school year, which began in September. In November, there was also a marked increase in infection outbreaks, defined as three or more cases within a 14-day period.

More significant than the number of infections is their rate of increase which is steadily on the rise. The *Times* article noted a 63 percent increase in infections on county campuses within the prior two weeks alone. LAUSD has not provided any reliable and consistent reporting on the subject, making it impossible to determine the ratio of infections to the number of students on campus.

Under county regulations, schools are allowed to apply for a waiver to bring up to 25 percent of enrolled students onto campus at a time to serve students with special needs. In addition to these waivers, schools allowing athletic teams to train are mandating that parents sign a waiver exempting LAUSD from responsibility for any illness and hospitalizations, and mandating that student athletes receive a COVID-19 test on a weekly basis. The new regulations do not explicitly require negative test results, only that those students verify that they've received a test.

The recent spike in COVID-19 cases at LA schools and throughout the region has led the school district

and the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) teachers union to state publicly that they are delaying plans for a full reopening until January at the earliest, with some officials stating that this timeline is overly optimistic.

The UTLA, which has fully collaborated with the district to reopen schools, is continuing negotiations behind closed doors, with UTLA President Cecily Myart-Cruz recently stating, “We are in bargaining with LAUSD on what an eventual return looks like, but we are not negotiating a specific date or timeline to return.”

It would be a profound mistake for teachers, parents and students to uncritically accept such statements. LAUSD is the second largest school district in the US, with over 600,000 students. Like the school reopenings in New York City and other large school districts across the country, the financial oligarchy is exceedingly impatient that LA reopen schools to set an example for other districts and demonstrate that there will be no further accommodations made to the lives of workers and their families when profits are at stake.

New York City’s Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio announced on Sunday that city schools would reopen starting on December 7, following a switch to full remote learning only 10 days prior. The schools were closed after the city exceeded the seven-day rolling average for positive coronavirus tests of 3 percent, a threshold that de Blasio has scrapped as schools are ordered to reopen despite skyrocketing cases of COVID-19.

The same week New York City temporarily closed its schools, LAUSD Superintendent Austin Beutner wrote an Op-Ed for the *Los Angeles Times* entitled “Getting kids back in classrooms should be a top pandemic priority.” In the Op-Ed, Beutner— a former investment banker and US State Department asset during the Clinton administration—wrote that in the race to reopen the economy, schools “must come first, not last.”

Far from proceeding, as they claim to be, on the basis of established scientific analysis of disease spread, the district is instead showing a reckless disregard for the safety of its students and teachers.

For its part, the UTLA has claimed that it will oppose any effort to reopen schools prematurely, yet until recently it had fully endorsed a January 2021 reopening plan despite projections that the virus will still be

raging out of control. Moreover, the district has already reached an agreement with the smaller Associated Administrators of Los Angeles (AALA) union involving minimum restrictions on school reopenings. This will likely follow recent patterns in which a precedent is first set with smaller unions, with the UTLA dutifully following suit later.

Teachers, parents and students can only protect themselves through the formation of rank-and-file safety committees independent of the unions, which have proven they will do nothing to keep them safe. The Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was formed in September precisely to undertake this critically important effort. We encourage all those who wish to take up the struggle in defense of the safety and lives of educators, students and the broader working class to join the committee and get involved today .



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