Washington, DC public schools return students to classes amid record-breaking COVID-19 spike

Nick Barrickman
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The Washington, DC school district, District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), recently began returning students to small group classes called Canvas Academics Real Engagement (CARE) classrooms. These classes entail daily in-person gatherings of students that are instructed remotely, while DCPS administrative staff are assigned to keep order in the classroom.

"The goal of CARE… is to provide a supervised educational environment for students whose parents need to be at their jobs," states *WTOP* News. Roughly 400 students in 25 DCPS schools began classes on November 18, with a second wave of students going to another six schools on December 2. More students are to be admitted December 9 and January 4, according to the DCPS reopening calendar.

On Wednesday, DC Schools Chancellor Lewis D. Ferebee announced that DCPS would likely feature in-person instruction by early February. "I'm just not willing to throw in the towel," the chancellor said, referring to the possibility of in-person learning helping to stem the tide of students struggling with deliberately sabotaged online instruction .

According to *WTOP*, "Staff members in protective gear, including plastic face shields and masks, greet students at the door to take their temperatures and provide hand sanitizer. Students then pick up a bagged breakfast at the door and head to one of two classrooms being used in the program."

If a student displays COVID-19 symptoms or has a temperature, they are escorted to a room with "Plexiglas shields, and a machine treating air in the classroom, a patient care technician or the school nurse would monitor the child until a parent can pick them up."

DCPS's original plan was to begin in-person classes on November 9. On November 2, the district announced it would keep all classes remote indefinitely after a rising number of teacher sickouts threatened to erupt independently of the Washington Teachers' Union (WTU) in the days leading up to the United States presidential election.

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time: "As the pandemic deepens and Trump erects barricades around the White House in anticipation of massive Election Day protests, there is mounting anger among teachers and the broader working class in Washington D.C. In order to contain a social explosion on the eve of the US presidential elections, the [WTU] and DCPS have opted to pull back from having a direct confrontation with teachers through the reopening of schools."

While the present number of 400 students meeting in classes is far less than the originally planned amount of 7,000 in early November, the reopening has proceeded apace after DCPS paused the introduction of CARE classrooms for only nine days. The subsequent "phases" of the reopening process will return hundreds, if not thousands of students, back to in-person learning.

This has occurred as daily new cases of COVID-19 are setting records in Washington, DC and throughout the region, posing an enormous threat to educators, students, parents and the broader community. Last Saturday, the District of Columbia reported 371 cases overnight, marking the highest daily number throughout the entire pandemic, according to the *Washington Post*.

"In the District of Columbia, hospitals that once were

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more than one-third empty have steadily filled up in recent weeks; in the second week of November, more than 90 percent of the city's hospital beds were full, the first time during the entire pandemic that the city had reached this marker. The city Department of Health labeled that threshold an indicator that residents' activities may need to be restricted," the *Post* wrote.

Regardless of these frightening numbers, district officials have plowed ahead with their reopening of schools. As with other major metropolitan regions in recent days, DCPS has begun to reopen classrooms to students under the unscientific claim that children do not catch COVID-19 or are unlikely to pass the virus to others.

Peter, a teacher in a school district near Washington, DC, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the efforts of public school administrations and politicians to re-open classrooms amid record COVID-19 infections. He stated, "They want to kill us," adding that these officials "are turning schools into childcare centers. They never cared about these students, they never funded these schools. Now suddenly, they are concerned about students that are failing classes" due to poorly-administered online learning programs.

In nearby Northern Virginia, Loudoun County Public Schools (LCPS) began sending 7,300 students back to classes for in-person instruction on Wednesday, while Prince William County Schools (PWCS) brought back 2,775 students to its buildings the same day.

These reopenings take place immediately after the Thanksgiving holiday, in which millions of Americans gathered with families and have likely passed the coronavirus on to unwitting relatives.

Peter told the WSWS about conditions facing a number of Catholic schools in his area that have decided to reopen ahead of the public school system, commenting, "Catholic schools in my area have been closed for weeks. Last month some of them reopened. Within a week, they had to close again because they've spotted COVID-19 cases among children and the faculty."

Educators in Washington, DC have continued to refuse a return to schools, and must immediately form independent rank-and-file safety committees to prevent the WTU from conspiring with DCPS to force them back to in-person teaching. The precedent set by the reopening of schools in New York City must be taken as a warning that the teachers unions are beholden to Wall Street and will do everything in their power to reopen schools, in order to force parents back to work producing profits.

The WTU has not yet signed an agreement with DCPS that would force teachers to report to class in-person, but is actively working with the school district to do so. A recent press release from the union stated, "We have worked diligently with our partners at DC Public Schools to create a framework that would allow our students to safely resume in-person learning in the coming weeks."

The WTU has also maintained the fiction that it is possible to reopen schools "safely" amid one of the deadliest pandemics in history. It has stood by as DCPS forces other administrative staff and children to enter unsafe schools. It has not raised demands that would address the purposely lackluster quality of online learning protocols or called for income support for families that have been forced to work in the pandemic.

Commenting on the role of the teachers unions, Peter stated, "Back in summer time, I remember American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten saying that teachers should strike against reopenings. The other day I read an article in the *New York Times* that featured Weingarten saying that now it's safe to reopen schools! I'm a member of the union, but right now I think that the right thing to do is to join the Socialist Equality Party in order to bring change."

It is essential that Washington, DC educators form independent rank and file safety committees in order to place the well-being of their schools and entire communities as the top priority in a struggle against the homicidal back-to-school drive and the COVID-19 deaths that are certain to follow. The Socialist Equality Party will do everything in our power to assist educators in this struggle, and we urge all those who wish to get involved to sign up today at wsws.org/edsafety.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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