

“It’s like the frontlines of a war!”

Washington educators denounce Democratic Governor Jay Inslee’s plan to reopen schools

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As the coronavirus spreads like wildfire throughout the United States and along the West Coast, Washington state’s Democratic Governor Jay Inslee announced last Wednesday, “It’s time to begin getting kids back into classrooms.”

The announcement follows the reopening of schools in New York City, which has spearheaded the broader trend of cities and states controlled by the Democratic Party reopening schools as quickly as possible. In addition to Washington state, last week saw Chicago and Washington, DC, announce plans to reopen schools in January. Similar plans were implemented across the state of Oregon last month, while officials in Oakland, California, are also moving to reopen schools in January.

These policies are developing in complete alignment with the incoming Biden administration, which has stated clearly that there will be no national lockdown and children should get back to in-person schooling as soon as possible. Both the Democrats and Republicans are equally willing to accept the infections and deaths of teachers, students and families as a necessary cost of resuming full production of the capitalist economy.

While pursuing different tactical approaches, both parties promote “herd immunity” and will provide no support to the population to enact a true safety protocol to save lives until enough of the population can be vaccinated to create real immunity.

Inslee’s new plan outlines “data-based” guidelines that allow some students to return to classrooms in every district, regardless of the infection rate. When positive cases are more than 350 per 100,000, the highest-needs elementary students—those with disabilities or those experiencing homelessness—will be brought back in groups of 15 or fewer. Elementary and middle schools will begin reopening when cases are between 50 and 350, and all students can return when the number of positive cases falls below 50 per 100,000.

When Inslee made this announcement on December 16, there were 420 cases per 100,000 in King County, the most populated county in the state that hosts much of the Seattle metro area. Previously it was recommended that counties

enforce distance learning if there were more than 75 cases per 100,000. The state witnessed a record daily case count of 5,963 on December 7, and deaths and hospitalizations have climbed to new heights since March.

According to CDC guidelines, case rates between 20 to 50 cases per 100,000 creates “moderate risk” for COVID-19 transmission in schools, with a “higher risk” for rates between 5 to 200 and the “highest risk” over 200.

Inslee claims that he has been persuaded by a new report from Bellevue-based Institute for Disease Modeling, in which researchers argue that as long as safety protocols are followed, schools are not significant drivers of infection for the coronavirus. These protocols include hybrid and “phased-in” scheduling, daily symptom screening, hand hygiene, masks, social distancing, small cohorts of students, “improved ventilation,” and some form of regular testing among staff and students.

Inslee announced that a meager \$3 million would be used as funding for securing these measures for all public schools in the state, which is home to the richest man in the world, Jeff Bezos, as well as major corporations Amazon, Boeing, and Microsoft, which pay next to nothing in state taxes.

Teachers and education staff know full well that even these limited safety measures will not be implemented or enforced in public schools, which are deprived of resources, lack adequate staff to ensure small class sizes, and often deal with poorly maintained building infrastructure. Even if the measures were enforced, returning large numbers of kids to school buildings when the virus is spreading so rampantly through the community will inevitably increase infection and deepen the community spread of the virus.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with educators in Washington about the drive to reopen schools and the conditions they face.

Monica, an elementary specialist from Seattle who has two of her own children in school, raised important questions, asking, “What exactly does improved classroom ventilation mean? Does it mean that we all get an air purifier paid for by our districts, or does it simply mean keeping a door or window

open?”

Referring to the state restrictions against bars, restaurants and fitness centers implemented on November 15, she added, “If it’s dangerous for five people to eat together at a table in a restaurant, how is it safe for 15 children to eat together in a classroom?”

When asked about the role that schools play in providing childcare so that parents can return to work for major corporations, Monica replied, “So it’s a corporate push to get workers back... to Amazon, Microsoft, Boeing. Our governor is buddies with Bill Gates.”

Trisha, a longtime paraeducator in a district just north of Seattle who also spoke with the WSWs, said that she is over 60 years old and has a compromised immune system. She is greatly concerned about returning to the classroom, which for her involves going from class to class as well as the lunchroom and recess. She also works one-on-one with students.

If she is no longer allowed to work remotely, she has been informed by Human Resources that her choices are to report to work or take leave. Once her sick leave runs out, she would be unpaid. She noted, “It seems that even a letter from my doctor does not change anything.”

Frances, a paraeducator in Vancouver, Washington, who has been in the classroom since the fall working with elementary students with disabilities, told the WSWs how terrifying it is to be placed in these conditions. “We are at 450 cases per 100,000. My sister’s school is at 1,200 per 100,000. This is insane!” She added, “It’s like the frontlines of a war!”

A science teacher named **Susan** told the WSWs, “I am just concerned about the push to get ‘back to normal’ when normal wasn’t working. I am disappointed we haven’t used this experience to create something better for our students, staff and families. I am worried about the health of my colleagues who teach at the elementary level as well as the staff required to be on campus for high risk students. The safety measures required are not being enforced because there is a lack of leadership and support.”

Susan commented, “I am concerned that our janitorial staffing has been severely cut down but there is this huge push to get more people back on campus. When there are not enough bodies to ensure safety protocols are followed, there is going to be an issue. Mask wearing is not being enforced regularly by administration and the lax behavior of our leaders does not leave me any confidence that the people on our campus are or will be cared for.”

The unions affiliated with the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have played a critical role in backing the supposedly “safe” school reopening plans of the Democratic Party, while smothering opposition among teachers by opposing strikes and leaving staff to fend for themselves.

They have tried to frame the deadly return to schools as a necessary measure to help the most vulnerable students and

“black and brown” communities, accepting the lie that there is “no money” to ensure universal access to high-quality remote learning while also protecting the health of all staff and families amid the pandemic.

Larry Delaney, the president of the Washington Education Association (WEA), while supposedly skeptical of Inslee’s reducing the disease thresholds, addressed the governor’s plans with no demands for the safety of the teachers that he represents. He stated, “My hope is that the governor and those who are advising him are correct... This is quite a gamble to take, and ultimately, it’s gambling with the safety of 140,000 educators.”

Most paraeducators in the state are represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which has enforced the district’s policies of sending these lower-paid workers into the schools first to serve the “highest-need” student populations with little to no protections. When paraeducators like Trisha attempt to reach out to the SEIU locals for help, they usually respond to say that “our hands are tied.”

Teachers, support staff, students and parents must organize independently of the pro-corporate unions, through the formation of a Washington Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to unite educators across the state to stop the deadly return to classrooms and oppose the false claim that schools do not lead to the spread of disease. Closing schools was one of the most important acts that slowed the spread of COVID-19 in March, and to open them again under a resurgence of infections has no basis in science, let alone any real concerns with the mental and social well-being of children.

This committee must fight to unify all sections of the working class in Washington—Amazon workers, Boeing workers, agricultural workers, dockworkers, and more—for the immediate closure of all schools and nonessential workplaces. All workers and parents must be given full income protection, housing, health care and food, while all educators and students must have access to all resources needed for high quality remote learning. The expropriation of the vast wealth of Bezos, Gates, and all the state’s major corporations could fund these programs and much more.

We urge all those who are committed to fighting against the homicidal campaign to reopen schools, and for the implementation of the policies necessary to contain the pandemic and provide for the needs of all workers to sign up to build an independent rank-and-file committee today!



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