

Democrats press to open schools across the US as pandemic surges

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In line with President-elect Joe Biden's stated aim to reopen America's schools during the first weeks of his administration, Democratic mayors and governors across the US are moving to resume in-person teaching in large urban school districts even as new infections, hospitalizations and deaths from COVID-19 continue to reach new highs.

After the restart of in-person learning in New York City—the country's largest school district—last month, Democratic officials in Washington state; Portland, Oregon; Chicago; Washington, DC; Oakland, California, and other big cities are working with teachers unions to resume face-to-face schooling as early as mid-January, despite widespread opposition from rank-and-file educators and parents.

Although the news media has conducted a non-stop campaign to downplay the deadly consequences of such a policy, evidence from the US and around the world has already demonstrated that schools are one of the primary vectors for the spread of COVID-19.

In the United Kingdom, where a new, more infectious strain of the virus is believed to be responsible for doubling the number of new cases this month, the latest data from the Office of National Statistics showed that the positivity rate was highest among school-aged children. In Ontario, Canada, where cases have also exploded, provincial officials have ordered the shutdown of all in-class learning at least until January 11.

US states continue to report that K-12 schools, along with manufacturing and construction sites and nursing homes, are the top spreaders of the virus. On Monday, the state of Michigan reported 21 new outbreaks at pre-K-12 schools, just days after Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer said she would allow in-person instruction to resume in high schools as soon as yesterday.

There have been more than 407,000 infections in US public schools, according to The COVID Monitor web site, which aggregates data from state and school districts, news media and public reports. These include at least 239,386 students and 108,548 teachers and support staff, according to the site, which has sought to break the official silence over

school outbreaks.

In the face of this, Biden has flatly rejected a national lockdown of schools and nonessential businesses, which is the only way to contain the virus and save lives until the vaccine is widely distributed and the population sufficiently inoculated. Instead, in a press conference earlier this month, Biden said the incoming administration “will work to see that a majority of our schools can be open by the end of my first 100 days.”

The *Washington Post*, CNN and other news outlets have reported that one of leading contenders emerging for Biden's pick as Secretary of Education is Connecticut Commissioner of Education Miguel Cardona, who has called for all of the state's districts to reopen for in-person learning.

Cardona and Democratic Governor Ned Lamont, a Greenwich, Connecticut multimillionaire and close Biden ally, have kept a third of the state's students in schools, even as daily cases reached over 8,000 in December, four times the number of the first surge in late April. Cardona, who has a Puerto Rican background, has joined Lamont and other Democrats who have cynically claimed that “black and brown” children must be sent into infected schools to keep them from falling further behind their white counterparts.

According to the *Connecticut Mirror*, Cardona has used “the public spotlight to call out the ‘education emergency’ school closures are causing, releasing data that shows the state's most disadvantaged students are missing twice as much remote school as their peers attending in-person and only four percent of the students attending the state's 10 lowest-performing districts are being offered the opportunity to attend in-person learning full time.” In an interview in November, the *Mirror* reported, Cardona absurdly stated that the transmission of the disease might be worse in thousands of kids who have remained at home or in the community, instead of in schools.

Cardona and Lamont have sought to bully officials in New Haven—the state's largest school district—for limiting schooling to remote learning only. Lamont stated earlier this

month, “The schools in the suburbs stayed open. The schools in New Haven never opened and that broke my heart that those kids in New Haven—overwhelmingly Black and brown [students]—have not had the opportunity to go to a classroom to be with the teacher, to be with their friends, to learn in person, for I think eight months at this point, and that’s one of the worst inequities I can see.”

The crocodile tears for minority youth never stopped the Democratic Party, which has long dominated the state government, from carrying out the most savage cuts to public education. During the last recession, public schools across Connecticut cut nearly the jobs of 1,300 teachers and other public-school workers, as part of the nearly 300,000 education jobs lost under the Obama-Biden administration.

Having lost nearly 20 percent of its local funding, New Haven officials and the teachers union signed a deal backed by Obama’s education secretary Arne Duncan in 2009, which established merit pay, allowed the firing of teachers and closure of schools based on standardized test performance and the expansion of for-profit charter schools.

This year, with the state facing a \$1 billion budget deficit, Governor Lamont has warned that he will have to carry out even deeper cuts, decimating school districts like New Haven, where one in three children already live below the official poverty line.

The herding of children back into the schools, whether it is being carried out by Trump and the Republicans or Biden and Democrats, serves one purpose: to free up working-class parents to go back to work so they can continue producing the profits demanded by Wall Street.

In California, where hospitals have been overrun and Los Angeles has run out of intensive care unit beds, the Democratic-controlled state legislature is pushing a bill—AB10—which would require schools to open when infection rates drop and counties qualify for reduced restrictions.

Local school districts would lose any power to keep schools closed and would be required to implement a plan to open within two weeks starting March 1, “setting a clear threshold for when in-person instruction resumes,” according to Assemblymember Phil Ting (D-San Francisco), who co-authored the bill with Assembly Education Chair Patrick O'Donnell (D-Long Beach) and Assemblymember Lorena Gonzalez (D-San Diego). As an article in *Politico* noted, “The AB 10 reopening date coincides with Democratic President-elect Joe Biden's goal to reopen schools across the nation in the first 100 days.”

While handing over trillions to Wall Street, the Democrats have done nothing to address the crying lack of internet access and support for teachers, parents and students needed to provide quality distance learning. Far from providing the

resources needed to allow parents to remain off the job and care for their children, the Democrats have just joined the Republicans in the passage of a “relief” bill which is consistent with their efforts to starve workers back into unsafe factories.

As for the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) and the other teachers unions, they have done everything to prevent a common struggle of educators across the country against the homicidal school reopening campaign. On the contrary, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA), and their state and local affiliates have peddled the lie that the schools can be reopened “safely” in the midst of the pandemic and have promoted Biden and the Democrats as champions of teachers and public education.

This underscores the need to expand the national Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site Educators Newsletter*. These committees, which have been formed independently of the unions, are fighting for a political general strike to demand the closing of nonessential production and schools and full compensation for workers.

At the same time, it is clear that the ruling class is exploiting the pandemic to accelerate its program of dismantling public education and funneling even more public resources into the hands of the corporate and financial elite. That is why the fight for the right to high quality public education is bound up with a political struggle against capitalism and both corporate-controlled parties and for socialism.



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