

As COVID-19 spreads, New York City schools prepare to reopen Monday after holiday break

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New York City educators must organize to close all schools and prevent the deepening spread of the pandemic. Only the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is fighting for this perspective. Join and help build the committee by signing up today at wsws.org/edsafety.

On Wednesday, authorities announced that New York City's seven-day rolling average for the positivity rate for COVID-19 tests rose to 7.93 percent. Cases have increased 25 percent and deaths 64 percent in the last 14 days. Nevertheless, the city's Democratic mayor, Bill de Blasio, assured the media that schools would reopen on January 4 after the holiday break.

In response to Wednesday's announcement of the COVID-19 figures, one educator tweeted to the mayor: "Stop acting like you're concerned about the virus. You have teachers working in unsafe environments."

Another commented, "You can't be planning on opening schools at this rate, right? By January 4 it will be at least 10 percent, just getting to the school is a huge risk for kids and teachers."

At a Tuesday press conference, de Blasio said, "Look at the amazing success we've had in our schools, keeping them safe. Clearly, New York City public schools are one of the safest places to be in all of New York City."

De Blasio then touted the fraud of school testing, noting that between December 7 and December 23 nearly 100,000 tests were conducted among students and staff, and the rate of positive tests was 0.68 percent.

Students and educators are randomly tested in each open school building once a week, and the monthly total of those tested must add up to 20 percent of the school's total population. This testing

regime—including the frequency, quality and reliability of results—is largely considered a joke by New York City educators and parents.

One city educator, noting that the Department of Education posted COVID-19 testing results on Monday, asked on Twitter, "Who's being tested on 12/28, since the schools have been closed since 12/23?"

A second New York educator commented, "There are teachers saying they've been waiting for days for results. Maybe this is how long the huge backlog is taking? Really confidence-inspiring as we're a few days away from even more staff and student cases and closures."

An art teacher told the WSWs, "Teachers are not informed of test results. The problem [of cases in schools] is bigger than what we thought, and testing 20 percent is not enough; that leaves eighty percent that can have COVID to slip through into class. It can be a week and a half before we get test results."

As of Wednesday, the city's Department of Education (DOE) claimed that there were 37 new school building closures because of COVID-19 infections, though many educators consider these figures also to be suspect.

The fact that schools will open again in the new year as the spread of the virus deepens is a crime perpetrated by the Democratic Party and its backers in the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). The UFT has played a critical role in deceiving its membership and the public about the scope and nature of the pandemic and preventing workers from engaging in actions to save their lives and stop the community spread of the virus.

The UFT made no objection in November when de Blasio threw out an agreement with the union,

originally made in August, to shut the schools when the city-wide test positivity rate reached three percent. The positivity rate may well be three times that rate when schools reopen next week.

UFT President Michael Mulgrew wrote in a Monday op-ed column in the *Daily News*, “New York City—the only major urban center in the United States to reopen its public schools—has successfully done so because of its cautious approach and rigorous standards.”

Because of the intense opposition by educators to school openings, Mulgrew was forced to criticize the city’s current testing practices in public schools by noting, “Some schools—despite the pledge to reach every building—have not been tested at all.” He also noted the well-known complaint of teachers that those tested are not informed of results for days.

While observing that “at some point in a period of high infections, schools could even become centers of virus spread,” Mulgrew made no pledge to close the schools in January.

The art teacher cited above expressed the sentiments of tens of thousands of New York educators, stating, “The union and the mayor are not helping us. Who then is there to turn to? Why pay dues? They don’t do anything for us. I know many who have had to hire their own lawyer. We should be able to bring it to the union, but Mulgrew and the mayor are not doing what they should. Teachers should get together. We are accepting garbage.”

The homicidal campaign being waged against educators through the reopening of schools during the pandemic represents an escalation of the broader assault on public education itself, which has been systematically defunded for decades. This process is now deepening as well, with unprecedented budget cuts being implemented and planned across the US, including in New York state and city.

States are projecting over \$200 billion in budget shortfalls for the coming year, with New York state alone facing a \$15 billion budget deficit. Officials are planning a 20 percent cut to state aid to municipalities, which will have a massive impact on New York City’s schools, the largest district in the country.

The Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief portion of the federal bailout bill passed by Congress on Sunday provides only \$54 billion for both K-12 schools and colleges nationally. New York state will

likely receive only \$4.1 billion of this sum, less than a third of the projected deficit.

New York City’s education budget for 2020-21 was \$34 billion, with the state providing 36 percent and the federal government and other sources providing seven percent of the total. Largely because of a decline in city tax revenue, the Department of Education was cut nearly \$800 million this year.

New York state budget spokesman Freeman Kloppott told the media that without federal aid, the state cannot fully fund all state operations and local assistance programs. He declared, “Should we have to make reductions, which would be a last resort, we will take district need and these federal funds into account.”

The crisis created by the coronavirus pandemic is unrelenting. The old organizations and parties that falsely claimed they provided protection for educators and public education have been exposed as frauds. The continuing spread of COVID-19 throughout New York City and the broader region demands a major shift by teachers toward industrial action in the coming weeks. This struggle can only be waged independently of and opposed to the unions and the Democratic Party, which are united at every level in keeping the schools open and imposing austerity.

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is the only organization conducting this fight. We urge all educators, parents and students to join and help build this committee in order to close all schools and nonessential businesses, provide full funding for remote learning and income protection for all workers, and stop the spread of the pandemic. Sign up today at wsws.org/edsafety.



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