

Biden and Democrats rush to reopen schools in new year as COVID-19 death toll climbs

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Dozens of large urban school districts in the United States—from San Diego, Tacoma and Denver to Chicago, Atlanta and Washington DC—plan to restart in-person schooling in the opening weeks of the new year, even as health experts predict January will see a “surge on top of a surge” of the coronavirus pandemic, which has already claimed more than 340,000 US lives.

December has been the deadliest month since the pandemic began, with nearly 70,000 deaths over the past 30 days and a record 3,725 deaths on December 29, according to Johns Hopkins University. “The next couple of months are going to be awful,” Dr. Jonathan Reiner, professor of medicine at George Washington University, told CNN. “We’re going to lose 3,000, maybe more people a day, probably until we’re well into February.”

These grim predictions were echoed by President-elect Joe Biden in his brief remarks Tuesday, when he said, “We will lose tens of thousands more lives in the months to come.” Infections over the holidays, he added, “will produce soaring death tolls in February,” and “we might not see improvement until we are well into March.”

Biden, however, proposed no emergency measures to prevent this catastrophe. On the contrary, he reiterated his plan to open up the majority of schools by mid-April, imperiling the lives of millions of children and educators. Underscoring this, Biden has chosen Connecticut School Superintendent Miguel Cardona, an outspoken advocate of reopening public schools, as his secretary of education.

A study of government mitigation efforts in 41 countries published in *Science* magazine last week found that closing schools and universities reduced the spread of COVID-19 by 38 percent, and closing nonessential face-to-face businesses reduced transmission by 18 percent. But the Biden administration has rejected any national shutdown. Instead, he is hell bent on returning students to classrooms so their parents can be herded back to workplaces to produce corporate profits.

The new and even more infectious strain of the virus which emerged in the UK, but has now been discovered in the US, Japan, Germany and other countries, appears to be more transmissible among children, who up to now have had lower infection rates than adults. According to the Office for National

Statistics in the United Kingdom, secondary schoolchildren, particularly those in Year 7 to Year 11, are seeing the highest rate of infection among the entire population.

Researchers at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine say another national lockdown in the UK would be “unlikely” to reduce transmission rates unless schools and universities were also closed, the *Daily Mail* reported. Nevertheless, most UK students will be sent back to school on January 11.

In the United States, only 10 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico had full or partial closures in effect as of December 21, according to *Education Week*. At the same time, four states—Iowa, Florida, Arkansas and Texas—have ordered all schools to provide in-person instruction, no matter what the local infection rates. The remaining 36 states have left the decision to individual school districts.

With the transition to the Biden administration, however, Democratic governors and big city mayors, working with the teacher unions, are moving to fully reopen schools. This started with the decision by New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio to reopen the largest school district in the US in late November, setting the precedent for schools across the US.

Despite the announcement Wednesday that the more contagious strain of the virus had been found in Southern California, where hospitals in Los Angeles are already overwhelmed, Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom has announced plans for a statewide phased reopening of schools to “safely bring our kids back into the classroom.”

Newsom is falsely claiming that this will have no significant impact on children, ignoring the fact that the state’s own modeling predicts that California will see a 100 percent increase in total hospitalizations by January 29, and a 60 percent increase in COVID-19 patients requiring intensive care.

While Los Angeles and San Francisco have delayed any openings due to widespread opposition from educators and parents, school board members in **San Diego** on Monday ratified a settlement with the teacher union to resume in-person learning next week in the San Dieguito Union High School District. The deal postpones the resumption of in-person learning for 12,900 middle and high school students from January 4 to at least January 27. K-6 students will be allowed to

return if individual schools submit a safety plan that is approved by the state and local governments.

Responding to Newsom's claim that \$2 billion in aid—\$450 per pupil—would allow schools to reopen safely, one reader on the Deadline website commented, "The state is having a nightmare time with infections right now and projecting that January will be worse. What the hell is he thinking!! Safely reopen! Putting teachers in danger and children in danger along with their families before they can get the vaccine is irresponsible!!! How about using that money to extend and improve childcare programs for those that need it now to work!!!"

In **Chicago**, teachers and staff for pre-kindergarten, moderate and intensive special education cluster programs are scheduled to return to class January 4, while students in these classes are set to return on January 11. Teachers and staff for grades K-8 are to report to schools on January 25, with students for these grades scheduled to be back in school February 1. The operation is being overseen by Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot, who has feigned concern over the educational challenges that minority children face with remote-only schooling, even though the Democrats have overseen decades of devastating budget cuts and school closures.

In the state of Washington, where Democratic Governor Jay Inslee declared on December 16, "It's time to begin getting kids back into classrooms," public schools in **Tacoma** will begin bringing back their 30,000 students on January 19, starting with two days of in-person instruction for kindergarten students.

Seattle Public Schools announced this week that preschoolers, kindergartners, first graders and students with disabilities will return to the classroom for in-person learning in March, the *Seattle Times* reported on December 18.

Minnesota's two largest school districts—**Anoka-Hennepin** and **St. Paul**—have announced plans to restart schools on January 19 and February 1, respectively, under new guidelines announced by Democratic Governor Tim Walz that would allow in-person learning to start in elementary schools across the state as soon as January 18.

Similar plans are in place for **Denver** (beginning January 11), Washington DC (early February), **Detroit** (January 11) and **Atlanta** (beginning on January 25). In DeKalb County, which is part of the metro Atlanta area, 300 educators and their supporters gathered Tuesday in Stone Mountain to protest plans to force staff to return to school buildings on January 4 and begin face-to-face instruction for pre-K through second grade, sixth and ninth grade on January 19, with the rest of the students returning by January 25.

Educators who lost a co-worker, elementary art teacher Patrick Key, to COVID-19 in neighboring Cobb County on Christmas Day, carried a makeshift coffin and held signs declaring, "I cannot teach from the grave" and "Masks are disposable, teachers aren't." Other signs denounced the

"choice" between staying alive and earning a living.

The Organization of DeKalb Educators, the local affiliate of the Georgia Education Association and the National Education Association (NEA), called the protest, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported, to get "more clarity on details of the plans for face-to-face learning." Parents, however, are discussing a "virtual sit-out" on January 7, and have been circulating a petition to demand online-only classes until cases decline and vaccines are widely available.

Increasingly, educators, parents and students across the US and internationally are taking the fight to oppose school openings into their own hands by forming rank-and-file safety committees independent of the unions. The latter are allied with Biden and support his back-to-school campaign. Such committees have been formed in California, Michigan, Texas, New York and other states, along with Australia, Germany and the United Kingdom.

But educators cannot fight alone. They must unite their struggle with broader sections of the working class, including workers in the auto industry, at Amazon and other logistics companies, in health care, and in other sectors of the economy. It is necessary to prepare a political general strike to shut down nonessential workplaces and schools. Instead of bailing out the banks and giant corporations, trillions must be reallocated to provide full compensation to workers and small businesses, and high-speed internet, state-of-the-art remote learning and specialized assistance to parents and students.

This struggle will pit workers directly against Biden and the Democrats, who, no less than Trump and the Republicans, defend the interests of Wall Street. To build a mass political and socialist movement against both corporate-controlled parties, educators should join and build the Socialist Equality Party as the leadership for the coming struggles of the working class.

We urge all education workers who seek to save lives, close schools and defend their rights to join the national network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees today at wsws.org/edsafety. Contact us today and build the Educators Rank and File Safety Committee Facebook group. To find out more, including information on joining the Socialist Equality Party, contact us today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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