

# Opposition mounts in US over deadly rush to restart in-person schooling

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Hundreds of school districts across the United States will resume in-person instruction in the coming weeks despite the spike in COVID-19 infections, a record 77,000 deaths in December and predictions that there will be 115,000 deaths or more in January. After the end of the holiday break, students are returning to schools in New York City, Palm Beach, Florida, and many other districts Monday, provoking widespread concern and opposition from teachers, support staff and parents.

Before the holidays, just over half of America's 50 million public school students were in remote-only classes, according to Burbio, a company tracking school districts' school opening plans, *USA Today* reported. President-elect Biden has pledged to get the majority of students back into schools during the first 100 days of his administration, which is set to start January 20.

The human cost of such a murderous policy was seen in the recent death of Zelene Blancas, a 35-year-old first-grade teacher in El Paso, Texas. Blancas, a bilingual teacher at Dr. Sue Shook Elementary School, died on December 28 after more than two months in the hospital, according to family members. Co-workers said she was a beloved teacher and a video she made two years ago of her students giving each other friendly hugs at they left for the day was viewed by more than 22 million people.

Comments on the Facebook group #teacherproblems give a glimpse of the popular anger over the restarting of in-person schooling.

"Greenville County at 43% [test positivity rate]. We return on Monday," a teacher from South Carolina wrote, with another in the state adding, "SC is 30%+ for the last 2 days."

Another teacher replied, "17% here in my county in Texas. We've been F2F [face-to-face] this whole time and going back on Monday. The week before the break, we had 13 cases in my school."

A teacher in Palm Beach County, Florida, added, "We just hit 20% positivity and are going back Monday."

A teacher in Leesville, Virginia, commented, "Going back Monday (4th) also and I live in THE hot spot of VA. I'm scared."

Hundreds of teachers in two Phoenix, Arizona, area school districts, which were set to reopen on January 5 despite a surge of cases in the state, are expected to conduct a sickout protest Monday. "Gilbert Public Schools and the Chandler Unified School District are reportedly preparing for the potential of a massive teacher sickout in January," the local CBS-TV affiliate reported last week, with as many as 600 teachers calling in sick from both

districts.

"With the numbers the way they are, and with hospitals overflowing we are very concerned that going back to school is going to increase numbers in our community as a whole, not just in our schools," a Chandler teacher told local media. Kerri Jones, a parent, added, "Chandler Unified has lost a coach—a student lost both parents who were heavily involved in school and I think teachers are finally getting to the point where they are thinking about what's safe and right for them and their students."

The rush to restart in-person learning is rightly seen as an insane policy. But it has a relentless logic from the standpoint of the economic and class interests that the Democrats and Republicans serve. Having handed over trillions to Wall Street and the major corporations in the bipartisan CARES Act passed in March, both parties have been ruthlessly determined to send children back to school in order to herd their parents back to work to produce the profits needed to pay off this debt.

In pursuing these policies, the two capitalist parties are employing a division of labor. Trump and the Republicans openly appeal to the most backward sentiments to suppress opposition to their homicidal "herd immunity policy." In a fascistic tweet Sunday, Trump declared that the CDC was exaggerating the number of cases and deaths from the "China Virus."

As for the Democrats, they reject any talk of a "national lockdown" while relying on the teachers unions to promote the lie that schools can be opened "safely." The subservient unions in turn do everything to prevent the outbreak of mass protests and strikes against the deadly back-to-school and back-to-work policies.

Both parties, backed by the media, deny scientific evidence that schools are a major spreader of COVID-19. Working in tandem, they exert immense economic pressure on teachers and workers to go back to work. This was underscored by the fact that under the terms of the \$900 billion bipartisan stimulus package passed at the end of 2020, starting on January 1 employers will no longer be required by federal mandate to give employees who become sick with COVID-19 two weeks of paid leave.

In Texas, which has seen over 28,500 COVID-19 deaths—the equivalent of all of South Africa—Republican Governor Greg Abbott and the Republican-led state legislature have allowed the state's "Hold Harmless Guarantee" legislation to expire. This law guaranteed full funding to districts if student enrollment fell, meaning that if any district in the state now contemplates closing

in-person instruction, even temporarily, it would face deep funding reductions, teacher layoffs and program cuts.

The promise of future vaccinations for teachers has been utilized by Democrats and Republicans alike to accelerate the return to school. But the disastrous roll-out, with only 2.5 million doses delivered instead of the 20 million promised by the Trump administration by the end of December, ensures it will take months before educators are inoculated.

This delay, however, will not slow the rush to reopen schools. In Ohio, where 71 percent of students are currently doing remote learning or a combination of in-person and online classes, Republican Governor Mike DeWine says his plan to get the state's 1.7 million students back in schools by March 1, "remains the goal," *USA Today* reported. Last week, DeWine announced that Ohio would no longer require students and teachers exposed to a COVID-19-positive person in school to quarantine "as long as the exposure occurred in a classroom setting and all students/teachers were wearing masks and following other appropriate protocols."

Over the holidays, West Virginia's Republican Governor Jim Justice ordered the state's 252,000 students to return to the classroom five days a week, starting on January 19, no matter what the infection rate in individual counties. The billionaire former coal operator feigned concern about the difficulties facing at-risk students, even though he and his predecessors implemented decades of brutal budget cuts, which led to the 2018 revolt by West Virginia teachers.

The Democrats have been just as ruthless as their Republican counterparts. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio is overseeing the return of thousands of students for in-person classes Monday, although the city's seven-day average positivity rate rose to 9.39 percent on Saturday, with 3,648 new cases, 201 new hospitalizations, and 32 new deaths, the *New York Post* reported. Testing positivity rates in the Richmond Hill and South Ozone Park neighborhoods of Queens are 17 percent.

Although de Blasio closed schools for three weeks in November when the citywide, 7-day positivity rate hit 3 percent, he soon declared that schools would stay open for the rest of the 2020–21 school year. A spokesman for the United Federation of Teachers told the *Post*, "Our experience so far has been that the actual infection rate in schools has been very small, including in hard-hit neighborhoods, but we will be monitoring results closely as in-school testing begins again Monday."

Chicago's Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and school officials have ordered thousands of Pre-K and special education teachers and educators to come to school buildings Monday, followed by K-8 teachers on January 25. "Teachers don't have a choice of opting in or out," Chicago Public Schools CEO Janice Jackson declared last month, "If they don't show up to work, it will be handled the same way it's handled in any other situation where an employee fails to come to work." In the face of these threats, the Chicago Teachers Union has urged individual teachers to complain to their principals.

In California, where the hospitalization rate has more than tripled over the last month and ambulances are waiting up to eight hours to unload COVID-19 patients at Los Angeles hospitals, Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom is using \$2 billion in

proposed spending to "incentivize" cash-strapped school districts to reopen elementary schools by February.

The measure, which would supposedly include provisions to prioritize school staffers for vaccinations and money for testing, PPE and updated ventilation systems, according to the *Washington Post*, is clearly aimed at creating conditions for the unions, including the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), to agree to the reopening of in-person learning. Thus far, opposition from teachers and parents has prevented this. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that state officials plan to make local reopenings contingent on agreements between labor unions and districts.

International experience has demonstrated the deadly consequences of the rush to restart in-person learning. In the United Kingdom, a new, more virulent strain of the virus has spread fastest among young people under 20, with children ages 11–17 seven times more likely to bring COVID-19 into the family, according to UK researchers. The variant, known as B.1.1.7., has now been discovered in Colorado, California and Florida.

Opposition is reaching a breaking point among educators. To stop this madness, however, educators must take matters into their own hands and unite with parents, students and other sections of workers to prepare a political general strike to close schools and nonessential businesses, with full compensation to workers and small business owners. The trillions handed to the billionaires must be redirected to provide high-speed internet, state-of-the-art remote learning equipment and special assistance to teachers, parents and at-risk students.

Educators throughout New York, Michigan, Texas, Pennsylvania, California and other states have established rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions and the two big business parties, to take up this fight.

*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](https://wsws.org/edsafety). Sign up today and help 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.*



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