

West Virginia schools slated to return to in-person instruction next week

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As COVID-19 cases surge across the United States, West Virginia's Republican Governor Jim Justice has ordered elementary and middle schools to reopen for five-day-a-week, in-person instruction starting January 19.

Justice justified the decision by pointing to falling referrals in child protective service cases and a report that one-third of remote-learning students were failing at least one core class. "We've got a bunch of kids that are out there, really suffering," he said. "So we must get back in school."

The governor's decision caters to corporate interests in the state eager to resume normal operations in the pandemic. In effect, the lives of teachers, staff, students, and the entire population are being tossed like kindling onto the fire. Moreover, with the possibility of the new COVID-19 variant first discovered in Britain spreading through the US, schoolchildren may be even more susceptible to contracting and spreading the virus.

West Virginia has received only 87,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccines delivered to the states. Of those, only 52,000 have been administered so far, including 8,300 to residents above age 80.

The state only began vaccinating teachers on January 7, less than two weeks before the schools are scheduled to open. This means that only a limited number of the teachers and other staff who must go back to in-person work will have received the first of two doses before returning to unsafe classrooms.

According to the state Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR), West Virginia has only 16,000 doses of the second shot on hand. Educators who receive the initial dose this week will not get the second shot until at least February, meaning they will be unprotected from the virus just before they could be vaccinated.

West Virginia's public health infrastructure is woefully threadbare even in "normal" times. The governor's decision prepares the way for a massive increase in transmission through a state where the majority of the population is health-compromised. By nearly every measure, West Virginia ranks among the worst nationwide for poverty, life expectancy, drug addiction, chronic disease morbidity and other aspects of individual and social well-being.

Kevin Brammer with Mountaineer Advocacy Group, a non-profit that advocates for children with disabilities in the school system, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about these issues. He noted that many public school children in West Virginia live with their grandparents, heightening the risks of school-originated transmission into the general population.

"In my opinion, the best course of action to keep our children and school personnel safe is to wait two to three months to give each individual the opportunity to have both series of vaccines if they so choose to do," Brammer told the WWSW. "Absolutely I am concerned about the spread in the schools when our entire state is in the red. Though we understand that kids recover quickly, the child is nothing more than a bottle rocket that would spread the virus throughout the community faster than an adult ever would."

Teachers have expressed outrage over Justice's reopening announcement and pointed out that his professed concern over falling grades is unfounded. One Cabell County teacher explained to the WWSW, "With West Virginia virtual school through the state, all assignments are marked as a zero. As the students complete assignments, the grades are changed to the grade they earned. So in essence they work backwards from failing to the passing grade they earn."

For that reason, the teacher explained, one-third of

students may look as though they are failing until grades are entered in mid- to late January, when many will see their grades come up and “will likely pass with As and Bs. It was an alarmist statement made to provide ‘evidence’ that virtual school is failing.”

The governor’s order includes scrapping the state Department of Education map to determine whether schools could open any classrooms to students, and instead using the DHHR’s color-coded county alert system map only for high schools.

This means that beginning January 19, elementary and middle schools may reopen regardless of the number of cases in a county. High schools will also be allowed to reopen if their counties are not in red.

Currently 54 of the state’s 55 counties are categorized as either “red” (eight percent test positivity rate or greater) or “orange” (5-8 percent positivity). Only one county is in “gold” (4-5 percent positivity).

Every indication is that cases will surge once staff and students report back to school after remote learning ends January 18. Some school systems are already reporting dozens of staff testing positive after “community spread” during the holiday period.

In a press conference January 6, Justice declared, “Without any question, we should be going back to school. I will continue to talk to our educators, but I will not be bullied by our teachers unions.”

In point of fact, the unions have done nothing to prevent the school reopenings, saying only that they were “surveying” the sentiments of their membership and that county superintendents would decide whether to call the schools back or not. But Justice, a Republican and former coal operator who is the state’s only billionaire and the largest landowner east of the Mississippi River, is keen to portray himself as “bullied” whenever the working class raises objections to the prerogatives of big business.

It is nearly the anniversary of the West Virginia teachers strikes of 2018 and 2019, which were aimed at preserving health insurance coverage and bettering the conditions in the schools. These struggles were suppressed by the unions and the Democratic Party, which promised teachers more funding that never appeared.

To the contrary, West Virginia’s education spending has further eroded in the time since the strikes. In the past year, statewide public school enrollment dropped

by 9,300 students, resulting in a projected funding drop of \$42.7 million.

As of Sunday, the state—with a population of 1.78 million—has recorded 101,212 total confirmed COVID-19 cases and 1,582 deaths, with new cases and deaths skyrocketing since November.

According to the West Virginia *Gazette-Mail*, “The state has broken records in recent days for the number of new cases in one day (1,680), deaths in one day (46), those hospitalized with COVID-19 (818) and the amount of people receiving care in an intensive care unit (217) or on a ventilator (102).”

In his January 6 press conference, Justice devoted the bulk of his time to defending a massive New Year’s Eve party thrown at his luxury resort, The Greenbrier. A viral video made the rounds on social media of the party, which showed a largely unmasked crowd mingling in one of the resort’s ballrooms.

The governor claimed not to know anything about the event, which he said he did not personally attend. “I had no clue,” he rambled. “You may throw rocks at me if you choose to do so. But I was lying in my bed, watching the ball drop and listening to J-Lo sing.” He was circumspect on questions of who was responsible for organizing the event.

Every effort must be made to oppose the reopening of schools in West Virginia, which will only deepen the catastrophe now unfolding across the state. All teachers and education workers must assimilate the lessons from the historic 2018 strike, and build rank-and-file safety committees wholly independent of the unions and both corporate-controlled parties. Sign up today at wsws.org/edsafety to take up this struggle in defense of public education and the lives and safety of all workers!



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