

# Baltimore City Schools announces wide reopening of schools in mid-February

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Last week, Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) CEO Sonja Santelises announced plans to widely reopen schools beginning February 16. While the city's Democratic Mayor Brandon Scott has yet to publicly comment on the reopening plans, the move undoubtedly has his support and it makes Baltimore the latest Democratic-led city or state to reopen schools as the pandemic rages out of control. The reopening of schools comes as Maryland reports near-record highs in COVID-19 cases and deaths, with about 2,500 daily new cases and 40 daily deaths.

Under Santelises' plan, Kindergarten-2nd grade students would be the first to return, with 3rd-5th graders and high schoolers returning on March 1. The school system will continue to offer parents the option of online learning, but Santelises expects about 25 percent of students to initially return under her plan. Roughly 2,000 of the district's 85,000 students have been attending schools since September.

In announcing the reopening plans, Santelises claims there have been no cases of transmission of the virus among students and staff. However, a school health aide, Marchiel McDuffie, died in October after returning to school. Wendy Smith, president of AFSCME Local 558, which represents Baltimore's school health aides, said that McDuffie's death was "100 percent work-related."

More than a month prior to McDuffie's death, school health workers reported serious concerns to AFSCME about the safety of returning to the city's dilapidated schools in the midst of the pandemic, including shortages of personal protective equipment, insufficient HVAC systems and poor air circulation inside buildings.

At the time of McDuffie's death, Smith said "You can't bring people together in a pandemic, without the proper personal protection and the proper ventilating of air. They had countless interactions with people in the school buildings. This did not have to happen. This was

absolutely preventable and predictable." Despite these statements, the union has organized no strike or other collective action to halt the reopening of schools.

In pushing the wide reopening, BCPS now says it will install "MERV-13 rated filters" where possible and "portable air purifiers" where the upgraded filters cannot be used for all schools. However, according to the school system's own status report provided to the *Baltimore Brew*, only 28 out of 108 elementary and elementary/middle schools have completed the air ventilation system upgrades.

The school system also says it will offer daily on-site testing for staff or students who experience COVID-19 symptoms, daily health screenings, and student desk shields. However, this will do nothing to stop the spread from asymptomatic students and staff.

In justifying the reopening plan despite the continued surge in coronavirus cases, Santelises argues that students are failing at far higher rates than before, with more than half of students in 3rd-12th grades failing at least one course this academic year.

"Many of our students are in danger of falling irreparably behind if we do not take action now," Santelises said, adding, "We will not ignore the needs of students for whom virtual learning is not enough when we have a safe, proven alternative to meet their needs."

In fact, the failure of online education is due to the decision of the ruling class to not provide the resources to make it successful. It is central to the reopening of the economy that online education "fail" so that ruling class representatives like Santelises can claim that schools must be reopened and parents can be shuttled back into unsafe workplaces.

Further, Santelises' claim that there are "safe" ways to reopen schools as the pandemic continues to spread out of control is belied by all serious scientific studies, which show that schools have been vectors for the spread of the

virus. Among other evidence, *Science* magazine recently published a study which found that among seven non-pharmaceutical interventions, school closures had the second highest impact on stopping the spread of the disease.

The rosy assurances from BCPS that adequate HVAC and air quality upgrades will now be made also cannot be taken at face value. A September 2018 ACLU of Maryland report revealed that Baltimore schools are underfunded by \$290 million a year. The same report found that 68 of the system's 163 schools were in poor condition.

As a result of decades of austerity, which has only deepened during the pandemic, schools lack basic sanitation supplies and reliable HVAC systems. In January 2018, an image of Baltimore elementary school students huddled in their winter coats with their hoods on in a classroom without heat went viral. This was hardly an exception, as about a third of the schools at the time did not have functioning heating systems.

Baltimore teachers are understandably wary of Santelises' claims that the schools will be safe. Michael Newhouse, a teacher with 23 years' experience, told *Baltimore Brew* that "There's a lot of mistrust in the system's ability to actually have this [ventilation] work done to the level that they said that they're going to have it done."

While the city attempts to push teachers and students back into classrooms, Mayor Brandon Scott announced on January 15 that a temporary ban on restaurant dining would remain in place due to a sharp rise in COVID-19 cases across the city.

Pointing to this obvious double standard, Danielle Hopper Dubasak, an Individual Education Plan associate, told the *Baltimore Brew*, "How is it okay for the children to sit in a classroom for six hours where you expect them to eat breakfast and lunch?" given the ban on restaurant dining.

While acknowledging that schools are not safe for reopening, the Baltimore Teachers Union (BTU) is doing nothing to effectively prevent this from taking place. In an official statement, the BTU offered no action to stop the reopening plan. Instead, their only demand was for the school system "to follow the science on these high stakes decisions."

The BTU is trying to tamp down growing teacher anger at the reopening plans, and held a membership meeting on January 19. A teacher who attended the meeting told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the BTU leadership opened

the meeting with a long presentation warning teachers against striking.

Instead, the BTU offered five options for toothless "escalation": a car rally, phone banking, using hashtags like #Makeitmakesense aimed at school officials, a march, and a petition, with demands to be determined. Indicative of the lack of democracy within the BTU, rank-and-file members were unable to speak at the meeting.

The teacher said the BTU's proposals in response to the city's reopening plans were "disappointing." She added, "Teachers have a strong collective voice that is being quelled. We are being told to sit down. The union is watering down teachers' voices." The teacher further explained that the pandemic has "exposed a lot of seething issues, including inequality."

Teachers seeking to resist the deadly opening of schools must organize independently of the unions and the union-backed Democratic Party. While the unions offer no measures to fight the reopening plans, Democratic politicians, whom the unions back, are pushing for the reopening of schools all over the country. In December, then president-elect Biden stated that "it should be a national priority to get our kids back into school and keep them in school." Biden is now pushing to have the majority of students in schools within the first 100 days of his presidency.

Instead, the *World Socialist Web Site* Educators Newsletter calls on teachers, students and parents to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, the only organization fighting to unify education workers, students and parents nationwide against school openings. Such committees have been formed all over the country and internationally.

We welcome all those who agree on the need to stop the reopening of schools to join today at [wsws.org/edsafety](https://wsws.org/edsafety). Teachers who agree with our perspective can also help grow support for these committees by sharing the education articles published daily on the *World Socialist Web Site* with their colleagues and on social media.



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