

Southern California school districts plan reopenings despite dire spread of COVID-19

Melody Isley
22 January 2021

This week California has crossed yet another devastating threshold, reporting more than 3.12 million cases of COVID-19 and 35,701 deaths. The state has now reported more cases than Italy and Japan combined, with a multitude of cases that still remain unreported.

According to Bonnie Castillo, the executive director of the California Nurses Association, death rates have increased by more than 82 percent in California over the last two weeks. In the past seven days, the state averaged more than 41,000 new cases each day, a significant increase since the period before the winter holidays.

One out of every 13 people in California has now tested positive for COVID-19, a number that is currently set to double every 72 days as long as 99.9 percent of California's population lives in regions deemed to have completely uncontrolled rates of infection, according to data gathered by the *Los Angeles Times*.

Los Angeles County remains the epicenter of the pandemic on the West Coast, surpassing one million cases last week. Suffering almost 300 COVID-19-related deaths each day, the city has recently suspended air pollution regulations to accommodate the massive influx of cremations for COVID-19 victims.

In some Los Angeles neighborhoods, one in every three school-aged children is now testing positive for COVID-19. In response to these undeniable conditions, the **Los Angeles Unified School District** (LAUSD), the largest school district in the state, was forced to postpone their reopening plans in December. Instead of having students return to regular classes on January 11, the school district will be continuing distance learning courses, but they began sending nurses back to campuses on that date.

In San Diego County, multiple school districts have opted to reopen elementary schools and allow for small group in-person instruction in secondary schools in the coming weeks. On Thursday, the **Poway Unified School District** (PUSD) board approved reopening schools for pre-K-5th grade between January 25 and February 1. Middle and high schools will be next to open for in-person instruction for

special education students and small cohorts of the student population. The district is the third largest in the county serving 36,000 students.

In December, when San Diego County was experiencing record high COVID-19 cases, PUSD had reported an outbreak of more than 70 positive cases among students and staff. By January 11, when they opened preschools and English as a Second Language classes instead of the full planned reopening, Poway Unified School District listed more than 125 cases among students and staff.

The main impetus for the delay in reopening, which was originally set for January 11, was due to teacher shortage. Carol Osborne, associate superintendent of Learning Support Services, noted in a recent interview with local media that PUSD has been struggling to find substitutes to fill the over 300 staff vacancies at its schools. Only 24 percent of substitutes are accepting full-time open positions, she added. Substitutes are also being used to cover teachers who must quarantine for 14 days due to close contact with a COVID-positive person.

The situation in Poway is yet another tragic example of the lie propagated by corporate media outlets and the Democratic Party that somehow children are immune to the virus, and that schools are somehow a COVID-free-zone.

In East San Diego County, a predominantly working class region of San Diego, case rates have been consistently above 1,000 cases per 100,000 people—a rate that is almost 150 times higher than what the state of California itself deems acceptable for resuming in-person instruction. In a perfect illustration of the state of California's anti-scientific and arbitrary tiered system of reopening, K-8 schools and some high schools in East County have been able to continue in-person instruction, due to a loophole of having started in-person classes before the governor's system was installed.

In the **Santee School District**, a small K-8 district responsible for a population of just 7,000 students, the school board was forced to adjust their January reopening plans, much to the disappointment of the school board bureaucrats and union officials at their public board meeting,

after an outpouring of opposition from parents and teachers in the district.

In public comments from the meeting, concerned parents and teachers begged the school board to not reopen for full instruction, many citing recent COVID-19 rates, personal stories of their experiences with the pandemic, and concerns for the inadequate protection of their children and teachers.

Echoing these emotional pleas, one parent begged the school board, “Please do not gamble with the safety of our teachers, the school staff, our children and families.” The district plans to continue their hybrid system, allowing half of the student population into classrooms for the morning and the other half in the afternoon, and revisit full reopening again in February.

Vista Unified School District began its semester on January 4 with in-person instruction for Pre-K-5th grade students despite multiple outbreaks in schools during the fall semester. **San Marcos Unified School District** plans to reopen Pre-K-1st grade classes on January 26 and allow for small group in-person instruction among students in grades 2-12.

Throughout Southern California, hospitals are nearing almost a monthlong period of zero percent Intensive Care Unit capacity. Doctors and nurses are being asked to ration care and prioritize patients with higher chances of living over those in more dire straits. Emergency medical workers have been given directives not to transport individuals with low chances of survival and have been directed to declare a patient dead if EMT workers are unable to resuscitate them within 20 minutes.

Amid these horrendous conditions, Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom has announced a \$2 billion “Safe Schools for All” program to incentivize a return to full instruction in February beginning with the youngest students, as part of the broader return-to-work program demanded by the capitalists.

Newsom’s plan falsely claims that schools can be retrofitted to “effectively stop the spread of Covid-19” even in close conditions and while the state still reports unmitigated spread in 99.9 percent of its communities. This lie that somehow schools and children are immune to the spread of COVID-19 is exposed by the fact that more than two million children in the US tested positive for the virus in 2020, accounting for nearly 12.4 percent of all cases, and as deaths among children and educators tragically become less and less rare.

The antiscientific lie in Newsom’s latest plan to bribe cash-starved school districts into unsafe reopening—that any reopening can be safe during these conditions—falls perfectly in line with the program of the Democratic Party. Now President Joe Biden himself recently declared school reopenings as a top priority for his first 100 days in

office. Meanwhile, all the teachers unions have been in lockstep with politicians throughout the pandemic. In their end-of-year statement, the California Teachers Association (CTA) responded favorably to Newsom’s plan to reopen schools, agreeing with various school board bureaucrats that there should be a common, statewide standard for safety rules as students return to classrooms. The statement declares, “We will work with the Governor and Legislature as this must be a joint effort to ensure a safe and successful reopening of schools.”

Similarly, the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) politely responded to the governor’s proposed reopening plan by simply stating, “proposed budget needs more work.” They added, “we need help to open our classroom doors,” begging for more funding to reopen schools.

The Democratic Party, teachers unions, school districts, and politicians at every level blatantly ignore the necessary means to lowercase rates in their jurisdictions. Their aim, instead, is to secure what little funding they can receive from the state to reopen schools under the worst conditions of the pandemic. All of their plans are designed to put children into unsafe classrooms so parents can return to unsafe working conditions as quickly as possible.

The necessary measures to contain the pandemic begin with the immediate shutdown of all schools and nonessential workplaces and directly paying every worker to stay home. The incredible sums of money lavished on Wall Street and the financial oligarchy must be reallocated for these purposes, and towards the creation of an effective and speedy nationwide vaccination program to eliminate the spread of the virus and save lives immediately.

The San Diego and Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees are fighting to unite educators and workers in Southern California and throughout the region to implement these policies. In conjunction with an expanding network of such committees among educators, autoworkers, Amazon workers and other sections of workers across the US, we are preparing workers to launch a nationwide political general strike to put an end to the homicidal policies of the ruling class and oppose the growing threat of fascism. All those who wish to join this struggle and our next meeting should sign up today at wsws.org/edsafety



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact