

Milwaukee school board approves plan to reopen schools

Michael Walters
1 February 2021

Milwaukee Public School Board unanimously approved a plan to begin the phased reopening of schools at their board meeting last Tuesday. The plan allows for 300 special needs students and their teachers to voluntarily return to in-person instruction on February 8. Further, it sets tentative return dates in mid-April for roughly 4,300 teachers and 75,000 students.

Under the proposal, 23,000 Pre-Kindergarten through 2nd grade students will return on April 12, 32,000 3rd through 8th graders on April 19, and finally 19,000 high school students will return on April 26. A similar tiered reopening schedule was utilized in Chicago and other districts to divide educators and attempt to stifle opposition. In Chicago, Pre-Kindergarten and Special Education teachers were ordered back into the classroom on January 4th while the rest of the district is remote.

The proposal is incredibly reckless and unnecessary, as it would have students back for little over a month before the school year ends.

The board will meet again in March to determine whether to fully reopen in April or postpone based on the prevalence of COVID-19 and the state of vaccination of the population. The Wisconsin Department of Health will allow educators to begin receiving the vaccine on March 1. However, it could be weeks before the vaccine is available.

The slow nationwide roll-out of vaccines is particularly sluggish in Wisconsin. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), only 0.8 percent of the state's overall population has received the first dose of the vaccine.

Last week Milwaukee received 2,200 doses, only 44 percent of its weekly request. Wisconsin is receiving 70,000 doses per week, approximately one-third of the amount needed to achieve the state's goal of

vaccinating 80 percent of the population by June. At the current rate, it will take roughly two and a half years to reach this goal.

The Board's decision comes after an outpouring of support to continue remote learning. In a district-wide survey last week, 39 percent of parents stated that they "would prefer to continue with virtual learning this school year for my child." A petition against reopening received over 3,800 signatures.

A written comment submitted to the meeting stated, "By asking teachers and students to return to in-person instruction, you are asking them to accept some form of loss—parents will get sick from their children and die. Without question, as we see nationwide, teachers will also get sick, their families will get sick, and we will see more fatalities in our community of educators. This is not acceptable. Keep public schools closed for in-person instruction until next fall when we will hopefully be in a better position to safely reopen."

Milwaukee Public Schools is the second largest school district in the Midwest and the 46th largest in the US. To force children and teachers back into classrooms during a pandemic would lead to a sharp increase in cases. School buildings have an average age of 87 years and many have dilapidated air circulation systems.

Underscoring the economic motive underlying the reopening of schools, documents obtained by the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reveal a direct line of communication between the Milwaukee Health Department and Milwaukee Metropolitan Association of Commerce. Senior lobbyist and longtime Republican Party operative Steve Baas has worked closely with health officials to influence reopening guidelines.

In one revealing email, Baas compared schools to child care. "I am confused as to why in Phase 4 child

care can operate at 75% but schools are still shut down. In a very real sense, schools are just academic child care. The ages change and the things they're "playing" with or learning with change, but the epidemiological dynamics are the same – numbers of children in space with adult supervision."

Baas gives a crude expression to the capitalist class' universal disdain for public education, while openly stating that the driving force behind school reopening is so that adults can return to work.

Wisconsin has had over 565,000 COVID-19 infections and over 6,300 deaths. One of these deaths includes the husband of a Kenosha public school teacher. Jim Hoffman, age 62, tragically passed away after contracting the virus from his wife Jeanne. Speaking to *Kenosha News*, Jeanne Hoffman said "This did not need to happen to my husband. As much as one might hope otherwise, it is naïve to believe that a district our size is equipped to keep people safe in any meaningful way."

Situated 45 minutes south of Milwaukee, Kenosha Public Schools is the state's third largest district and the largest to offer in-person learning as an option. Hoffman, a Special Education teacher, was assigned a group of three students.

As the seven-day COVID-19 test positivity rate has dropped to a still highly elevated 19.3 percent, the Wisconsin legislature is now set to overturn the state's mask mandate. Two weeks ago, the Wisconsin Department of Health Services detected the first known case in the state of the more contagious COVID-19 variant, B.1.1.7. As the state continues to open up businesses and schools, the emergence of this variant could lead to skyrocketing cases.

While MPS has slightly postponed school reopenings, teachers should have no illusion that this schedule won't be moved up. The Biden administration has made reopening schools within 100 days a key priority and has the full backing of the teachers unions including the National Educators Association (NEA), the parent organization of the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association (MTEA).

For its part, the MTEA is disarming teachers with the illusion that schools can be safely reopened. MTEA Executive Board President Amy Mizialko was one of the signatories to a love letter to Joe Biden in December, which congratulated Biden and endorsed his

plan to reopen schools amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic, while encouraging him to utilize racist and identity politics.

It is crucial that Milwaukee teachers, school workers, parents and students unite with their counterparts across the state and begin building a Wisconsin Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to shut down all non-essential production and definitively halt in-person learning throughout the state.

Such committees have been formed in Chicago, New York City, Texas, Alabama and other cities and states across the US, united as a network through the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. This is the only organization fighting to unify education workers, students and parents across state lines in preparation for a nationwide general strike to close all schools and nonessential workplaces and provide full income protection and resources for all workers.

We call on all Milwaukee and Wisconsin educators who agree with this perspective to get involved and sign up today at wsws.org/edsafety!



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact