

Washington D.C. public schools begin in-person instruction as Virginia teachers resist return

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Public school teachers in Washington D.C. have been ordered back to in-person classes this week after an arbitration court on Saturday ruled against a last-minute complaint filed by the teachers union.

On Sunday, a major snowstorm forced the city to backtrack on its plans for Monday in-person classes. With consummate cynicism, Democratic Mayor Muriel E. Bowser resisted canceling classes until the last moment, even as the city declared a citywide emergency, which will last until Tuesday. Students and teachers have been told to be in class Tuesday.

As many as 15,000 pre-kindergarten and elementary school students will begin returning to classes in the nation's capital this week, which marks the beginning of the DC Public School (DCPS) system's third quarter. In addition, 4,200 school staff workers are obligated to report in-person this week.

While DCPS teachers have been cleared to receive doses of the vaccine, last week DC health director LaQuandra Nesbitt told reporters that the city's vaccination program was operating at a "dismal" level. As of Saturday, only 1,330 DCPS teachers and 800 charter staff have received the vaccine, which could take weeks before providing full protection. Even if timely vaccinations of school staff were possible, children could still become infected and pass COVID-19 to their parents and each other.

The Washington Teachers Union (WTU) filed a last-minute claim against the District last month alleging that the city administration had failed to honor conditions in the plan struck in December between the WTU and DCPS. The WTU stated that DCPS had not provided proof that it had repaired its ailing HVAC systems, or conducted satisfactory walkthroughs at each school.

In its ruling, the city arbitration panel found that DCPS had failed to honor its agreement in certain instances, but it did not justify delaying the re-openings. The panel ruled that two schools, Calvin Coolidge High School and Watkins

Elementary, would have to delay their openings to provide satisfactory walkthroughs for city staff before reopening.

The DCPS-WTU Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) struck in December was wholly inadequate for ensuring safety to teachers, administrators and students. The *World Socialist Web Site* at the time labeled the MOA's standards "cosmetic," adding that its demands for "walk-through teams" at each school had little say-so over final decisions and had none of "the necessary expertise in occupational safety and health to properly evaluate the safety of school buildings, many of which are decades old and dilapidated."

Due to widespread opposition from teachers, the school system was repeatedly forced to delay in-person classes, which originally were set to start in November but were disrupted by a wave of teacher sickouts. Ultimately, DCPS and the WTU agreed to put off the plan.

Democratic Party and union officials calculated that reopening with the support of a Democratic Biden administration would be preferable to forcing a reopening in the midst of the US election and threats from Republican President Donald Trump. Small groups of students were still encouraged to attend in person in specially designed "CARE" classrooms, monitored by school staff.

Now, however, DCPS and the Bowser administration have committed to the homicidal school reopening plans which are being pursued by the Biden administration at the national level and local governments led by both Republicans and Democrats in cities and towns across the country.

While presenting delays at a handful of locations as "significant wins," the WTU has utterly capitulated to Mayor Bowser's demands for schools to be open as COVID-19 cases continue to climb in the District. In response to the panel's ruling, WTU President Elizabeth Davis has floated the possibility that her organization may issue more impotent legal actions.

A DCPS teacher who spoke to the WSWS explained how the WTU has stifled educators' opposition to the reopening.

“A lot of members are upset” that the WTU had forced them to “put their hopes in the arbitration panel’s decision,” the teacher said, preferring anonymity to speak freely. They said, “the rank and file had little part in deciding” the terms which are present in the DCPS-WTU agreement on reopening and that the strategy of relying on the city government to rule against itself had “hurt morale.”

According to this teacher, “a large portion of the rank and file” support collective action against DCPS’s reckless reopening plans. “There is a group [of teachers] that has been left in the dark because there has been no organizing for a struggle,” the teacher said. Teachers had “little confidence” that any struggle organized on such a basis could win.

Over the course of the pandemic, government officials have quietly ended their claims of observing health metrics in their decision-making processes for reopening schools. In a press statement over the weekend, DC schools Chancellor Lewis D. Ferebee gloated: “The arbitrator’s decision makes it clear: all of our schools are safe and ready to reopen, and we look forward to welcoming back thousands of students and teachers on Monday.” This followed Mayor Bowser’s declaration last week that “[w]e need our school buildings open.”

According to Washington D.C. official numbers, only 9,000 students have signed up for in-person classes. The *Washington Post* cited statements from Sharra Greer of the Children’s Law Center, an advocate for the city’s impoverished families. Greer told the *Post* “most of her clients are struggling with virtual learning but declined a slot for-person classes because they didn’t feel safe.”

The main concern of the advocates of an in-person return to class is “so that parents can get back to work,” as President Biden has repeatedly said.

Parents have been asked to monitor their children for COVID-19 symptoms on a daily basis and withhold their child from the roll if they exhibit sickness. Such “do-it-yourself” prescriptions for maintaining public health and safety were proven to be catastrophic failures throughout the fall. To date, over 2 million US children have tested positive for COVID-19.

The science rests entirely on the side of public health officials and workers who refuse to reopen schools until the pandemic is safely brought under control. Current conditions in Washington D.C. are dire. The daily case average in the District increased Saturday to 256 COVID-19 cases. The city has counted over 30,000 cases.

Neighboring Virginia and Maryland have seen averages that are triple and double the amount recorded in spring, respectively. The more transmissible British and South African coronavirus variants have been reported in both

Virginia and Maryland. Over the weekend, officials in Baltimore reported that community transmission of the South African strand was “likely.” Baltimore Public Schools has announced plans to reopen later this month.

In nearby Northern Virginia, Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS), the nation’s 11th largest school system, has demanded students and teachers begin returning for in-person instruction by February 16. FCPS, with over 180,000 children, plans to return at least half of its massive study body to in-person classes by next month. This has continued even after teacher vaccinations were halted last week when supplies ran low.

Fairfax teachers have repeatedly forced the school board to delay the resumption of in-class schooling, however. The Fairfax Education Association agreed to a return if teachers were vaccinated but has now said the start date should be pushed to March 2 because of vaccine shortages. The resistance of Fairfax teachers has provoked the ire of the national news media, including Jeff Bezos’ *Washington Post*, which have given outsized publicity to small groups of parents who have denounced teachers for defending their lives and those of their students and communities.

It is now an urgent task that teachers in D.C., Fairfax and Baltimore form rank-and-file educators’ safety committees to oppose the reckless reopening policy. Teachers must reach out to other sections of working people, including logistics, transit workers, city and federal employees and others, in order to prepare a general strike to force the closure of schools and nonessential businesses and provide genuine public health measures and income protection to workers and small businesses.

The *World Socialist Web Site Educators Newsletter* will offer all assistance possible to educators seeking a genuine fight against the inhumane policies of big business and “herd immunity.” To get more information and to join the national and international network of educators rank-and-file safety committees, contact us today.



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