

San Francisco district and unions agree on school reopening plan after city lawsuit

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On Saturday, the United Educators of San Francisco (UESF), a collection of several unions representing all school employees, reached a tentative agreement with the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) with a phased reopening plan to force 52,000 students and teachers back into schools for in-person learning.

Under the new framework, which has yet to be voted on by teachers and school workers, schools will begin to return when the county enters the “red zone” of California’s latest “Blueprint for a Safer Economy” reopening plan. The “red zone” signifies a test positivity rate of 5 to 8 percent and up to 7 daily new cases per 100,000 people.

According to the tentative agreement, reopening is contingent on staff members having “had the opportunity (eligibility and access) to be vaccinated at the recommended dosage.” However, teachers and staff do not have to receive vaccines before reopening if the county reaches the “orange zone,” with a test positivity rate of 2 to 4.9 percent. Currently, San Francisco County is in the highest “purple zone” with a positivity rate higher than 8 percent.

The agreement endorses the idea that it can be “safe” to reopen schools before the COVID-19 pandemic is properly contained, a conception that relies on skewed data, pseudo-science and the false promise of providing all necessary resources to schools.

Susan Solomon, the president of UESF, stated, “This agreement sets the stage to safely reopen schools in San Francisco. Now we need city and state officials to step up and make vaccines available to school staff now, while UESF continues to focus on finalizing agreements around classroom instruction, schedules, and continuing to improve remote learning for the students and families who choose not to return even with these standards in place.”

“All of us want to reopen schools in a way that is safe for everyone,” said Rafael Picazo, who serves as the chapter president of the school district’s Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1021. “We will work around the clock to do our part to make a plan, secure the resources needed, establish the timelines, and immediately begin the work to reopen safely.”

AFT President Randi Weingarten retweeted the UESF’s post with the comment: “Very happy to see this agreement! Reopening safely takes patience, transparency, and hard-earned trust between all of the stakeholders. It can be done and @UESF is now another example.”

The agreement was announced just days after the City of San Francisco sued its own district in order to force the reopening of schools. The lawsuit was based on the claim that the continued closure of schools is harming students.

City Attorney Dennis Herrera writes in the case, “Students are struggling academically and achievement gaps are becoming cavernous abysses. Students are feeling isolated from their friends, peers, and teachers. And they are experiencing other mental and physical health consequences from distance learning.” Herrera added that the San Francisco Unified School District should have “earned an F” for failing to plan to reopen schools.

Rather than condemn this outrageous act of legal intimidation, Anna Maria Chavez, the president of the National School Boards Association, responded to the city of San Francisco’s actions by insisting that reopening schools requires “collaboration” and that these decisions are “very difficult.” SFUSD Superintendent Vincent Mathews also replied to the lawsuit by saying they would be “feverishly working

toward and fighting for and pushing for the return of students to in-person learning.”

The push to reopen schools comes as the COVID-19 pandemic is claiming more lives than ever before. The month of January was devastating on a national level. Over 6 million cases were reported and over 95,000 people succumbed to the virus. In addition to the staggering data published every day, Dr. Michael Osterholm, a member of Joe Biden’s coronavirus transition team, is warning that “the next 6-14 weeks could be the darkest weeks of the pandemic.”

Under these conditions, there is no safe way to reopen schools for in-person instruction. Despite this reality, the Biden administration, local governments and the unions are doing everything they can to force the final reopening of all school districts by the spring.

Schools are already open in nearly 90 percent of schools in Marin County, which neighbors San Francisco. Over 100 private and parochial schools in San Francisco are already open, even though Northern California is an epicenter for the spread of the disease. The reopening plan for SFUSD will undoubtedly be used as a model for large public school districts across the region, such as Oakland.

All the claims that a “safe reopening” is possible are entirely false so long as the pandemic is not effectively combatted. Even if all teachers and school staff were vaccinated before schools opened, an achievement that is highly unlikely at the current rate of distribution, the virus could still spread throughout the student population to their family members who can then spread it at work.

Despite their references to data and science, the fundamental concern of both parties is to prevent any downturn in the stock market. In order to protect the well-being of Wall Street, children must return to schools so their parents can return to work regardless of the consequences to human life.

Against the weight of pressure from above, teachers and other school staff in San Francisco and across the country remain opposed to the reckless policy of returning to in-person learning. In fact, over 10,000 Chicago teachers and staff are currently engaged in a struggle to oppose the collaborative effort of the Chicago Teachers Union and the district to reopen public schools this week.

The fight of educators is approaching a major turning

point. Opposition must be organized for educators, school staff, working class families and students to demand online instruction with full funding to public schools, teachers and families to ensure every child has access to high-quality instruction and support networks. This is not only necessary but entirely possible, given the immense amount of wealth sitting in the hands of the 165 billionaires residing in California alone.

The fight for a scientific, rational plan to combat the pandemic and protect workers lives is running up against both the Democrats and Republicans, the trade unions and the mainstream media. Educators and workers across the United States and internationally are forming a network of rank-and-file safety committees to mobilize an independent struggle, oppose unsafe conditions and halt the drive to reopen schools.

We urge teachers, parents, students and other workers in San Francisco and across the state of California to contact us and join the Northern California Educators Rank-and-File Committee.



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