

New York City to open middle schools for face-to-face instruction

Sandy English
10 February 2021

New York City educators must organize to close all schools and prevent the deepening spread of the pandemic. Only the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is organizing this fight. Join and help build the committee by signing up today at wsws.org/edsafety.

New York City will continue the national juggernaut of reopening schools to in-person instruction by allowing over 62,000 middle-school students (grades 6–8) back into buildings, exposing them and their educators to COVID-19. By the beginning of next month, the city plans to have 250,000 of its 1.1 million students in face-to-face learning.

The Democratic mayor, Bill de Blasio, repeated the ruling-class canard in relation to school reopenings at a press conference on Monday: “Our schools have been remarkably safe, in fact the safest places in New York City. That’s why we know it’s time to bring back our middle-grade kids now.”

City Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza also said on Monday that nearly half of the 471 middle schools that are reopening will accommodate many children five days a week.

The positivity rate in the city has averaged 8–9 percent over the last two months. People continue to fall ill and die throughout the city, but at higher rates in poorer working-class neighborhoods.

The disease remains a significant factor in the school system. According to city data there are presently 190 school buildings and an additional 434 classrooms closed because of COVID-19 infections. Currently, when two or more cases of the disease are discovered in a building, the building is closed.

The middle-school opening announcement follows de Blasio’s statement last week on WNYC’s “The Brian Lehrer Show,” that school closure policies are “being reevaluated, obviously, because we need to improve our ability to get that exactly right.” Last month, following new guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), New York state announced that school buildings where infected staff or students were detected

would be quarantined for 10 days, not 14. The city tests 20 percent of students and staff once monthly, a figure regarded by many to be highly inadequate.

The city is also planning to reopen indoor dining at reduced capacity on Friday, which will also drive up the infection rate. New York’s Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo announced Monday a plan called “NY Pops Up,” in which musicians and other artists would stage public outdoor and indoor performances. Given that some of the performers are well-known names such as Renée Fleming, Hugh Jackman, Mandy Patinkin, Chris Rock and Amy Schumer, the program threatens to draw large and closely packed crowds that will spread the coronavirus.

There is increasing evidence that gatherings of children and adults in New York City public school buildings constitute a major vector for transmission of the infection. Princeton researcher and former education blogger Jennifer Jennings was widely quoted in the media saying, “The number of positive New York City Department of Education staff cases doubled in the first three weeks of January, compared to total cases reported between September and December.”

Jennings’s research found that elementary school teachers, many of whom are teaching in-person, have been infected at a higher rate than high school teachers, most of whom teach remotely.

Jennings noted that the number of infected children in New York City has also increased. “For all New York City kids 5 to 17 years old, over the same four-month period, we had approximately 21,000 cases; we’ve added 12,500 new cases since the beginning of January alone,” she said.

Last week, 11 of 16 children, as well as the teacher, in a third-grade class in a public school in the suburb of Bethpage, Long Island, tested positive for COVID-19.

De Blasio’s reopening announcement coincides with the events in Chicago, where Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) announced an agreement that would open the Chicago schools. The union pushed through ratification of its agreement in its House of

Delegates on Monday night.

As with Chicago educators, New York City educators are overwhelmingly opposed to school reopenings, and, like their Chicago counterparts, are trapped within an organization, the United Federation of Teachers, that has facilitated them.

Although the UFT negotiated an agreement in August to close schools when the citywide positivity rate exceeded 3 percent and was forced under pressure of the teachers to close the schools when the rate reached that level in November, de Blasio, with the assistance of the UFT, was able to reopen schools in December during the second wave of the pandemic.

Since that time, the 3 percent threshold has been dropped by the union and not replaced with any other standard. It should be noted that the CTU, like the UFT, has negotiated a positivity threshold that would only hypothetically shut down schools. The recent conduct of the CTU gives no indication that it will observe the threshold any more than the UFT.

The plan to reopen New York City middle schools is accompanied by a concerted attempt in the media to tell the public that school buildings are safe. Justin Krebs, a “progressive” Democrat who is running for New York City Council and the former National Director of Campaigns at MoveOn, a major Democratic Party PAC, penned an op-ed in the *Daily News* saying, “[P]ublic health data shows us that we can return to schools safely—if we invest in our safety in smart, impactful ways, ensure adequate COVID tests, increase vaccination rates among teachers and families, and create better home-based options for students who can’t return.”

The same sentiment appears in a *New York Times* profile of American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten, formerly the UFT’s president. The article extols her tireless work on behalf of the Biden administration in fighting to see that schools open. The main thrust of the article is that she has taken on the hard task of suffocating opposition among teachers.

The assumption of the article, and the basis on which it judges the union bureaucracy and educators, is that schools are safe. “A body of international research,” *the Times* notes, “now suggests that in-school transmission of COVID-19 can be effectively mitigated with precautions such as masks and social distancing, especially where local virus rates are controlled. But with the emergence of dangerous new variants and a slow vaccine rollout, teachers remain skeptical.”

This skepticism, which might be better characterized as conscious and scientifically informed opposition to school reopening, remains entrenched among educators in Chicago,

New York City and thousands of other school districts in the US. Opposition by New York educators to face-to-face instructing during a pandemic remains overwhelming. The announcement that de Blasio would reopen schools elicited angry reactions from parents and educators on social media.

One teacher noted on Twitter: “Testing is scattered and disorganized -Situation room is overwhelmed -Class cohesion suffers because of case levels -Variants will be the norm soon.”

Another said, “As a teacher in a NYC school building these buildings are NOT safe at all. The protocols are risky, the amount of children in the building [is] risky and the testing they are doing does not come back until 9 days after you take them. By that time COVID has already spread.”

One parent directly addressed the mayor: “We want our kids back in school, but not in ... conditions where the city hasn’t put all the effort nor has the means to keep teachers and children safe, on top of that with all the variants out there is just bound to get ugly.”

It should come as no surprise that neither the UFT nor any of its “opposition” caucuses, such as the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE), which models itself on the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) leadership of the CTU, has expressed support for Chicago teachers, although the UFT was brazen enough to retweet the *New York Times*’ article on Randi Weingarten. The silence by the UFT and MORE on the attempt to return Chicago teachers to school buildings was only highlighted when both MORE and the UFT retweeted articles about the death of former CTU president Karen Lewis.

Educators in New York City and the region need a new perspective. The middle school reopening comes at a time when the Democratic Party, the capitalist media, the unions and their hangers-on are seeking to extinguish the opposition of educators and reopen the economy for the benefit of Wall Street.

Only one alternative has been provided to educators to fight back and win: The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. It is only this organization that seeks to rally New York educator in support of their brothers and sisters in Chicago as a part of a program of shutting schools in New York and across the United States.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact