

Drive to reopen schools deepens across Los Angeles as pandemic continues to rage

Hong Jian**18 February 2021**

Throughout this week, the drive to reopen schools across Los Angeles County has deepened, despite the fact that over the past week the county averaged 2,339 new cases and 123.1 new deaths per day.

On Monday, Los Angeles County Supervisor Janice Hahn announced on Twitter that Los Angeles County had “officially reached the state’s threshold for reopening elementary schools.” She gleefully added, “This is what we have been working towards... Now we can continue the work of getting our kids and teachers safely back in classrooms where they belong.”

On Thursday evening, the LA County Department of Public Health and LA County Office of Education jointly sponsored a town hall event which had a large audience that asked over 500 questions. Following the lead of the Biden administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Hahn and other officials sought to downplay the dangers involved in reopening schools.

There are 78 school districts in LA county, including Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second largest in the US with over 600,000 students, and Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD), the third largest in California, with 81,000 students. While LAUSD and the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) have not given updates on their secret negotiations to reopen schools, many of the other districts in the region are pressing ahead with this reckless move.

On Wednesday, the LBUSD Board of Education announced that TK-5 teachers would be returning to their classrooms on March 22, with students returning the following week on March 29 for two and a half hours per day.

The LBUSD board meeting was livestreamed on YouTube with the comments turned off, and viewers were told to call and leave a voice message with any

questions they had, some of which were then read at the meeting. While the topic of school reopening was listed as the 22nd item on the agenda, the voice messages were all concerned with that topic and the majority of those read were against the resumption of in-person learning.

One teacher said that “we are in unknown waters,” noting the fact that LBUSD was aggressively moving to open schools without any scientific justification for this move. Another parent made the point that having children go to school for two and a half hours with strict social distancing guidelines will mean that there will be little benefit from social interactions.

Once it became apparent that the majority of callers were against the reopening of schools, the board ended these contributions and informed everyone that the comments would simply be added to the public record. After a twenty minute break, LBUSD Superintendent Dr. Jill Baker announced that Transitional kindergarten-5th grade teachers would return to schools on March 22.

The board sought to browbeat opposition by touting the fact that teachers will be prioritized to receive vaccinations. However, many teachers rightfully oppose this dangerous policy that will cause an untold number of needless deaths. Teachers are not essential workers, and with the limited availability of the vaccine, the elderly and most vulnerable layers and essential workers should be given priority when it comes to vaccine distribution.

Furthermore, the board made sure to note that teachers were not required to be vaccinated before returning to classrooms, they merely needed to have the ‘opportunity’ to receive both doses of the vaccine. This is in line with recent statements by Biden and the latest guidelines from the CDC, which dangerously

state that schools can reopen regardless of the level of community spread and before the population has been fully vaccinated.

The district made great hay out of their plan for reopening schools, claiming to have purchased large quantities of PPE and mandating that tests be performed weekly on all students and staff, by the students and staff themselves.

According to the safety guidelines set down by the LBUSD, facial coverings are to be worn at all times while on school grounds “except when eating, drinking or playing.” They are to be worn while entering and exiting the schools, and while on buses, “as tolerable by student.” In other words, if children find their masks to be a nuisance while on the bus, they are told they can take them off.

The district also explicitly states that gloves are not necessary, with the exception of food handlers, cleaning staff, or those performing first aid or medical tasks. While gloves for students are not recommended, the surfaces that hundreds of students will be touching everyday will only be cleaned and disinfected once per day.

A video posted by LBUSD shows desks purportedly spaced for social distancing purposes. In actuality, the desks are spaced much less than six feet apart, and students who sit by the door and in the front rows will constantly be coming into contact with their fellow students as they walk into the classroom and go to their seats.

Regardless of the cosmetic measures implemented by LBUSD, schools are unequivocally unsafe places in the midst of a raging pandemic. In an effort to preemptively blame teachers, parents, students and staff for the inevitable rise in community spread, LA County Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer said that if schools follow the proper protocols, they “are not high risk settings” for the spread of COVID-19.

Numerous peer-reviewed studies underscore the fact that it is not safe to reopen schools until the pandemic is contained. A recent study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that there was a 62 percent decline in infections per week and the mortality rate dropped 58 percent per week when schools were closed statewide.

With Biden’s pledge to reopen schools for in-person learning within the first 100 days of his administration,

the Democrats are finishing the job begun by Trump and the Republicans last fall. This campaign has nothing to do with science or helping children learn, but rather to keep the money flowing into the coffers of the pandemic profiteers by compelling parents to return to unsafe workplaces.

To put a stop to the monstrous crime that is being prepared, educators, parents and students must unite with the broader working class independently of the two capitalist parties and the unions that serve them. It is critical for all educators, parents and students throughout LA County to join and help build the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, to become the voice of opposition to the escalating campaign to recklessly reopen schools.



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