COVID-19 cases in New York colleges rise as state changes guidelines to keep schools open

Alex Findijs
24 February 2021

COVID-19 cases continue to rise in the State University of New York (SUNY) system after the state erroneously altered its guidelines for handling coronavirus outbreaks.

Since schools opened last fall, state guidelines for universities in New York have required that if a school recorded 100 individual cases or five percent of the student body became infected in a two week period then the school would be required to switch to two weeks of remote instruction.

However, facing a slew of outbreaks across the state, the state government decided to alter the guidelines to keep schools open rather than follow its guidelines. As of February 19, schools will be allowed to remain open with up to 5 percent of the student body infected in a 14-day period as long as schools meet testing requirements. The decision has no scientific grounding and is clearly politically motivated.

With the Biden administration and the Democratic Party putting their full weight behind the campaign to reopen schools, the SUNY system is finding that mandated school closures pose a threat to this policy. If public schools were to open while universities around the state of New York were closing just weeks into the new semester, how could anyone expect classrooms to be considered safe for returning students at any level?

In the view of the Democratic Party and ruling elite more generally, the political stakes are far too high. The SUNY Board of Trustees, which is full of millionaires and Democratic Party officials, has decided that it must bend its own rules to their maximum in order to protect the policy of “herd immunity” pioneered by the fascistic Trump administration in Washington.

This approach follows a previously trodden path. In the fall, SUNY announced unscientifically that case numbers contributing to the 100 case threshold would reset to zero every two weeks rather than operating on a rolling 14-day period. This came at the same time that SUNY Oswego had 147 active cases and was shortly forced to switch to remote instruction as case numbers neared 200 within a matter of days.

It is three weeks since in-person instruction began at SUNY campuses and 2,400 cases have already been recorded. Over 1,000 of these have occurred just since February 13. More than 1.5 percent of the entire on-campus SUNY population has been infected since January 30, and one-in-seven students at SUNY Cortland have been infected since the fall of 2020. Both SUNY Cortland and SUNY Geneseo are closing in on four percent of the on-campus study body being infected in the just the first month of classes.

In the past several weeks, SUNY has outdone itself in its apparent quest to arrive at the most unscientific and blatantly politically motivated decisions possible. On February 12, the state government announced that schools would not have to include towards the closure threshold students who tested positive before in-person classes began. The announcement was made the same day that both SUNY Geneseo and SUNY Cortland would have passed the 100-case mark without the state’s intervention.

Just one week later, the state government revised the guidelines again. The new guidelines state that universities will not be required to temporarily transition to remote learning as long as they test at least 25 percent of the on-campus student body each week. Only if the total number of students infected in a two-week period surpasses 100 or 5 percent, whichever is greater, will a school be required to transition to 14 days of remote instruction. The new guidelines will see nearly all schools raise their threshold considerably.

At Binghamton University, which reached 125 on-

© World Socialist Web Site

campus cases over the weekend, its threshold for transferring to temporary remote instruction rose from 100 cases to over 700. Since the change in policy, Binghamton has seen its case numbers rise to 214 as of Tuesday night which will undoubtedly rise considerably by the end of the week.

The announcement of the change in guidelines came on February 19, just as Binghamton was on the verge of passing the previous threshold, which would have forced the university to transfer to remote instruction for the third time this academic year.

There is no scientific basis for these policies, nor do they do anything to provide for students' wellbeing. The original SUNY threshold was arbitrary but at the very least served as a moderate bulwark against the ability of the virus to run rampant through campuses. Now, SUNY and the New York state government are allowing the coronavirus to spread through student bodies at a considerably larger scale. This will have disastrous effects for students, staff and local communities.

Even with increased testing this semester, cases continue to expand. SUNY cannot test itself into having safe campuses. This is because the spread of the coronavirus is not contained on college campuses but rather is spreading between communities and the schools in which they are located.

A recent study published in *Computer Methods in Biomechanics and Biomedical Engineering* which reviewed data on COVID-19 outbreaks in universities and local communities found that half of the schools reviewed experienced outbreaks two weeks before the surrounding communities and warned that "college campuses are at risk to develop an extreme incidence of COVID-19 and become superspreaders for neighboring communities."

A similar study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that universities that opened with in-person instruction were related to a 56 percent increase in the incidence (daily cases per 100,000 people) of COVID-19 in neighboring communities 21 days after reopening. It also found a 17.9 percent decline in incidence for counties in which universities relied on remote instruction.

These studies are part of a growing body of evidence showing that in-person instruction for education in all age groups plays a significant role in the spread of COVID-19 cases.

Under these conditions, whether or not young people face significant risk themselves is a moot point.

The fact of the matter is that in-person instruction is putting the lives and health of everyone involved at risk. The tools and ability to provide every student with proper supplies for online instruction exist. Every students and educator could have been provided with the technology, infrastructure, and lesson plans as far back as March of last year.

Students and educators must join together to demand better funding for public higher education, lower tuition, expanded services for online instruction and physical and mental health, better measures to curb the spread of the virus, and a transition to online instruction with equal or higher standards of quality.

The money and tools for this program exist, but they must be expropriated from the hands of the ultra rich who have promoted the drive to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of lives in order to generate profits for themselves. Tens of thousands of more lives are at stake and so is the future of higher education. All students and educators who want to take up the fight to improve higher education and end the coronavirus pandemic must sign up to join the National Educators Rank and File Safety Committee, which is organizing educators across the United States to stop the pandemic and fight for better education for all.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site