

San Francisco school board pauses reactionary school renaming campaign to focus on forcing schools open

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At a special school board meeting Tuesday night, the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) Board of Education announced a pause on their racist campaign to rename 44 school sites in order to intensify efforts to reopen the city's schools in a matter of weeks amidst the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

The announcement of a halt to the renaming of schools comes nearly one month after the school board voted to approve the renaming of one third of its school sites in the district including the erasure of the names of revolutionary historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

The initial decision to rename schools produced an onslaught of opposition from parents, community members and the public at large who criticized the process as flawed and lacking historical research. The right-wing initiative to rename schools on the basis of racist politics is a deliberate attempt to falsify history and showcases the hostility district officials have toward the entire working class of all races.

Responding to mass public opposition to the school renaming and facing heightened pressure from city officials to reopen schools, San Francisco Board of Education president Gabriela Lopez said in a statement Sunday, "... reopening will be our only focus until our children and young people are back in schools. We're canceling renaming committee meetings for the time being. We will be revising our plans to run a more deliberative process moving forward, which includes engaging historians at nearby universities to help."

Lopez's statement makes clear that this week's decision by the board does not end the efforts to rename schools. Any resumption of the reactionary campaign, which rejects the significance of the legacies of the

Great Emancipator as well as the Founding Fathers and falsifies the revolutionary and progressive character of the Civil War, the American Revolution and even the Enlightenment, must be rejected.

As the working class is entering into struggle and a fight for its lives amidst a pandemic which has already killed 500,000 Americans, the ruling class is doubling down on efforts to use racial politics to divide the working class and break down resistance to its homicidal policies. Teachers must draw the necessary conclusions from the fact that those driving for renaming are now dead set on pushing for the resumption of in-person learning, which will facilitate the spread of COVID-19 among students, teachers and staff.

San Francisco is currently in California's "purple tier" or highest category for COVID-19 transmission with 9.4 average daily new cases per 100,000. Despite widespread transmission and news of more infectious and deadly variants of the virus within San Francisco, the school district alongside the educator and school worker unions are pushing ahead with reopening plans.

The San Francisco school board voted unanimously on Tuesday to open schools before the end of the school year. Tuesday's vote also approved the tentative agreement between SFUSD and the United Educators of San Francisco (UESF), a collection of several unions representing school educators and staff, made earlier this month which sets in motion the guidelines for face-to-face instruction for the district's 52,000 students. Under the tentative agreement, the district will begin phased-in reopenings as soon as the city reaches California's "red tier": a 7-day average test positivity rate of 5 to 8 percent or up to 7 daily new cases per

100,000 people.

The agreement also notes that once the city reaches the red tier, staff and teachers onsite should have at least “had the opportunity to be vaccinated at the recommended dosage.” Further, schools may be opened without providing vaccinations to staff and teachers once the county reaches the “orange tier”: a 7-day average test positivity rate of 2 to 4.9 percent or 1–3.9 daily new cases per 100,000. No set date has been determined for reopening but given the recent decline in case rates, public health officials anticipate San Francisco will be in the red tier within weeks.

SFUSD superintendent Vincent Matthews also announced Tuesday that the district is preparing for its “Phase 2A” of reopening which would open classrooms for students who have been identified as a priority for in-person learning. Under their initial phase at least 2,900 students will be offered in-person instruction including preK-13 students with moderate/severe disabilities, and preK-2 students. Parents will be given the choice of 100 percent in-person learning or a hybrid schedule. After Phase 2A of reopening, the district will reopen to the rest of the student population.

“We are committed to reopening as many schools as possible for in-person instruction,” Matthews said. “Our goal has been and continues to be to maximize daily in-person instruction for students and maintain as much consistency as possible by welcoming students back to the school in which they’re enrolled.”

Significantly, an additional Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was recently made between SFUSD and UESF to open an assessment center in the district for special education students. The assessment center will open during the district’s initial phase of reopening and will not require vaccinations to teachers and staff. John O’Connell High School will have ten rooms designated for assessments throughout the day and in-person staffing will be voluntary.

Despite its claims to be fighting for the interests of teachers and school workers, UESF has been an integral part in the reopening plans which will throw teachers and students into deadly classrooms in a matter of weeks.

UESF President Susan Solomon said in a statement, “We strongly believe that the most equitable and workable schedule is to keep students together with the

teachers who have taught them this entire year, and to bring students to school at least four days a week, even if they are half days and that families who choose not to return won’t be left out.” UESF is proposing four days a week in-person for half days and one day online for about 14 hours a week.

District and union officials continue to argue that schools can be reopened “safely,” yet this is entirely false unless the pandemic is adequately contained. The tentative agreement between SFUSD and UESF fundamentally accepts the reopening of schools which is a policy that carries with it deadly implications and will facilitate community spread of the virus.

Following President Joe Biden’s pledge to reopen all schools in his first 100 days, school districts throughout California such as SFUSD are in a fever pitch to open for in-person learning before the end of the school year. Educators, students and parents must reject the homicidal efforts to reopen schools throughout the state and beyond. Opposition must be organized to demand online instruction with full funding to public schools, educators and all families to ensure every child has access to high-quality instruction and resources for support until COVID-19 is suppressed.

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



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