

San Francisco Bay Area school districts push to reopen schools

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27 February 2021

Following the sellout agreement by the Chicago Teachers Union to resume in-person instruction as the pandemic continues, Democratic politicians across Northern California are moving forward their own drive to get children back into classrooms before the pandemic is contained.

On February 7, the United Educators of San Francisco (UESF) union reached an agreement to allow “limited instruction” when San Francisco County moves to the second highest “red” tier of the pandemic as defined by state government's guidelines, provided that teachers are vaccinated beforehand. If the county moves to the “orange” tier, then full in-person instruction can resume without teachers being vaccinated.

This followed the February 3 San Francisco City lawsuit against the school district over the delay in school re-opening. Mayor London Breed threw her support behind the lawsuit, posturing as a champion for children's education, and reiterating the scientifically false claims used to promote school reopenings: “Our children are suffering. And there's no way I would ever support using the legal system to get our schools open if we were on a path of moving forward and if not for the Department of Public Health telling us it's safe to do so. We have to be better.”

Susan Solomon, UESF president, was quoted by Bay City News as stating, “This agreement sets the stage to safely reopen schools in San Francisco.” However, this claim by the union could not be further from the truth. In the county of San Francisco, the seven-day new case average is at 72.9, with 2.6 deaths per day.

San Francisco County is still in the highest “purple” tier of infection. The metrics used in this system vastly underestimate the risk of infection in order to provide the false impression that reopening can be safe. California Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom's system uses an “adjusted case rate” that leaves out those infected in

prisons and jails. San Francisco County's adjusted case rate stands at 5.2, which underestimates the actual case rate at 8.3.

Regardless of “tier,” closing school sites to in-person instruction remains among the most effective public health interventions to slow the spread of the pandemic. Although many California cities have experienced a drop in infection rates from their disastrous highs in December and January, there remains uncontrolled community spread as a deadlier variant of the disease, designated CAL.20C, has become dominant.

A University of California San Francisco study showed that this new variant grew to more than half of sampled new infections in January. A review of patient records in San Francisco showed patients with this variant were five times more likely to need ICU admission and 11 times more likely to die. Those precise ratios need to be refined with further study, but highlight the need to eradicate the pandemic before more lives are lost or more variants can evolve.

Speaking with the *Los Angeles Times*, Dr. Chiu, the senior author of the study, said that it would be imperative to drive down infections as much as possible while rapidly moving to vaccinate the population. This assessment was echoed by Dr. Angela Rasmussen, a Georgetown University virologist, who stated, “The [UCSF] findings warrant taking a much closer look at this variant. ... They underscore the importance of pulling out all the stops in terms of both exposure reduction and increased vaccine distribution and access.”

One of the arguments put forth by the city and the state governments of California, that schools are safe to reopen since there is no detected spread at them, flies in the face of research.

Dr. Deepti Gurdasani, an epidemiologist from the UK, challenged these claims on the *Mehdi Hasan Show* on Feb. 19. She pointed out that the data used to make these

claims comes from students who are tested after showing symptoms, thus missing the high percentage of asymptomatic cases. She provides the data collected in the UK from random sampling, which removes this bias. The data shows a strong correlation of infection in children to school openings. Dr. Gurdasani has said on twitter: “The infection rates among primary & secondary school children closely follow school openings, closures & levels of attendance. E.g. We see a dip in infections following Oct half-term, followed by a rise after school reopening.”

Exploding the myth that infection among children is simply “a reflection of infection in the community,” Dr. Gurdasani points to ONS (Office for National Statistics, UK) research last year showing primary school children were twice as likely as adults to be the first case in the household, and once infected, twice as likely to infect contacts than adults.

Instead fighting to reduce transmission to zero, district after district is working with the unions to suppress teacher opposition and put students and families at risk by reopening in person instruction. In Berkeley, California, another significant Bay Area school district, the Berkeley Unified School District and the Berkeley Federation of Teachers have also come to a tentative agreement for reopening. The plan involves a staggered reintroduction of in-person learning starting March 29 for second grade students and younger, and ending April 19 for those in grades 10 through 12.

In San Jose, the largest city in Northern California, Mayor Sam Liccardo has begun a campaign to pressure the school district and teachers union to finalize an agreement to return to school. The Mayor, anxious to get students in school and parents at work, falsely claimed, “School can be open... and teachers and staff and children kept safe even without vaccinations,” at a press conference Thursday. Previously the district and union agreed to reopening based on entering the “orange” tier of spread, currently it is in the “purple” tier.

Meanwhile the Oakland Unified School District is pushing to have students back in the classroom within weeks, according to a letter sent this week by the school board to families. The Oakland Education Association bargaining team sent out a message to special education teachers asking how they felt about volunteering to return to in-person instruction. The reopening would begin mid-March and continue through April.

The California Department of Public Health updated the state’s COVID-19 tier map Tuesday, showing that both Marin and San Mateo counties had moved into the less

restrictive “red” tier. Underscoring the rampant spread of the virus, under this supposedly safe tier for re-opening, San Mateo County still has reported 96 new cases and three deaths per day for the last seven days. Marin County still reports a seven-day average of 23.3 new cases, with 1.3 deaths per day. Marin is returning to at least part-time, in-person instruction starting on Monday.

In December, Governor Newsom unveiled a plan to hand \$2 billion to schools for a “safe” reopening. The plan would provide limited funding for vaccination of teachers, coronavirus testing for students and staffers, personal protective equipment and updating ventilation systems. The entire proposal is farcical, following the state’s 2020 budget decision to delay \$11 billion in funding to schools. Even this new limited plan has yet to be approved by the state legislature. That the governor has been working with the unions to open schools was revealed by the governor’s comments that his administration has been in talks with them for months and has a “very, very constructive relationship” with them.

Teachers must be warned that the well-being of themselves and the children is not paramount in the minds of union officials. Just like in Chicago, the unions are actively preparing their betrayals. Not a single step in this struggle can be taken with any of the unions in charge.

Teachers in the Bay Area must join the Northern California Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to organize a struggle independent of and in opposition to union treachery, uniting teachers throughout the region with their allies in the working class. To join the committee, learn more at wsws.org/edsafety.



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