

Major school districts press to reopen throughout Washington D.C. metro area

Harvey Simpkins
26 February 2021

In lockstep with President Joe Biden's push to reopen schools across the United States, school systems throughout the broader Washington D.C. metropolitan area have reopened or are in the process of reopening. The return to schools follows separate announcements by the governors of Virginia and Maryland calling on all schools to reopen in March.

On January 21, the day after Biden was inaugurated, Maryland's Republican Governor Larry Hogan announced in a bullying speech that all Maryland schools should return to at least hybrid instruction by March 1 and threatened action against teachers who did not return. During his press conference, Hogan pointed to Chicago, where the city locked out and withheld pay from teachers who did not return to schools, as well as South Carolina, where the state threatened to take away educators' teaching licenses.

"If school systems don't immediately begin a good faith effort [to reopen] we will explore every legal avenue at our disposal," Hogan said. In a letter the same day to the president of the Maryland State Education Association, he cited Biden's call to return to schools, adding that "the prompt return to in-person instruction is vital to our nation's success."

Virginia's Democratic Governor Ralph Northam, meanwhile, announced on February 5 that all school systems in the state should reopen by March 15. Both governors made lying claims that schools could be made safe in the midst of the pandemic.

"It's possible for us to have in-person learning safely," Northam said. "Everybody will come on board with this and get our children back into classrooms." Likewise, Hogan baldly asserted that "There is no public health reason for county boards to keep students out of schools. None. This really isn't controversial. The science is clear."

Hogan is correct on one thing: the science is clear. However, contrary to all those pushing for schools to open, the science clearly shows that school staff and students are transmitting the coronavirus in schools and spreading it within their communities.

Across Virginia, only 21 out of 132 districts remain fully virtual and all but three, the cities of Portsmouth and Richmond, along with Sussex County, are planning to reopen in the coming weeks.

In Portsmouth, where resistance to reopenings remains

strong, Cardell Patillo, the chairman of the school board, explained at a meeting this week that the push to reopen despite continuing high infection rates treats teachers and students as "sacrificial." Patillo added, "It's almost like, 'Hey, we know we're going to lose some [people], but we're not going to lose the majority.'"

Fairfax County, Virginia, the eleventh largest school district in the country with 186,000 students, began an accelerated reopening February 16. By March 9, students across all grade levels will be able to return for in-person learning.

Announcing the reopening plans on February 2, Fairfax School Superintendent Scott Brabrand referred to Biden's reopening push, stating "We acknowledge that no situation is risk-free, but the risks are greater in not returning students at this time. Our president has asked for this, and we must come together now."

Within days of Fairfax County schools reopening, positive cases have been reported. After only returning for two days, a special education student was exposed to a teaching assistant who tested positive for COVID-19. The school system failed to notify the student's family for four days after the positive test.

The student's mother, Kolleen Kennedy, told WTOP radio, "I panicked because I have a 76-year-old mother, who is around [the boy] all the time, and who was around him on Thursday, because she was helping me with him." The family is now in quarantine for two weeks.

After schools on Maryland's Eastern Shore reopened on February 8, a teacher there told the *World Socialist Web Site* that "we have had a COVID case each day we've been open. Currently both of our nurses are in quarantine and several teachers."

Until the reopening push, Fairfax County had been almost fully virtual, with only certain vocational and special education programs open for in-person classes. Despite limited attendance, the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) has reported outbreaks, defined as having at least two positive cases, in 18 Fairfax County public schools and in three private schools. Statewide, there have been outbreaks in at least 148 schools, according to VDH data.

In order to preempt rising teacher anger, the Fairfax school system approved 2,300 of its 15,000 teachers to continue

working virtually. As more students return to classrooms, the school system is hiring about 850 classroom monitors to take the place of teachers. Thus, many students returning will sit in front of a laptop for virtual instruction inside school buildings, in place of the same instruction at home.

The teachers unions have facilitated the return to in-person learning. In late January, the president of the Fairfax Education Association (FEA), Kimberly Adams, said, “We think all students need to be vaccinated before in-person instruction resumes full time.” However, this was simply a public relations maneuver. The FEA has proposed no action to resist the accelerated reopening, with Adams only insisting that “a hybrid learning option must continue to be available to all students and staff.”

Next door to Fairfax, in Washington D.C., schools reopened on February 2 with extremely low attendance. On the first day of classes, the *Washington Post* noted that at one elementary school only one student showed up; by the end of the week only nine students were attending in-person. Despite this minimal attendance, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) required 1,800 out of 4,000 city teachers to return during the first week.

Five DCPS elementary schools reported positive cases after only three days of in-person learning, forcing all students in the class with a positive test to quarantine. On the weekend of February 6–7, a DCPS cosmetology teacher, Helen Marie White, died from COVID-19. She had been teaching at an alternative adult program since the fall.

In response to the death of White, the Washington Teachers Union (WTU) continues to do nothing to protect its membership. Instead, it issued a statement to “respectfully ask” DCPS to implement certain inadequate health measures, including adherence to both watered-down CDC guidelines and the provisions of a largely cosmetic “memorandum of agreement” that the WTU entered into with DCPS last December.

In a February 7 article summarizing the first week of Washington’s reopening, the *Washington Post* reluctantly acknowledged the reality that in-person learning is not going to improve the quality of education, explaining that teaching both in-person and remote students “meant those in class were wearing headphones, facing their laptops and listening as their teacher addressed the classroom learners and at-home learners simultaneously.”

In Maryland, all public school systems are set to open by March 1, with the most populous districts, including Montgomery County (162,000 students), Anne Arundel County (80,000), Howard County (60,000), Baltimore City (84,000), Baltimore County (111,000), and Harford County (39,000) beginning the reopening process Monday.

Baltimore initially planned to reopen on February 16. After widespread resistance from parents, teachers and students, the school system pushed back the reopening by two weeks. On

Wednesday, Baltimore students held a protest against reopening at school headquarters.

At the protest, Eamon Lekso, a high school student, said that reopening, “will increase the exposure to COVID-19 to students, teachers and families in Baltimore. We must act now.” Another high school student, Blanca Rosalez, told the crowd that along with “the demands from our teachers such as vaccines, ventilation upgrades and others, we ask for students to do virtual learning from home like we’ve been doing since March.”

Another student pointed out that the underfunded school system has no full-time nurses in any of its schools and that “even when nurses are present they lack the resources to truly care for students. I can’t count the number of times me or my peers have received a wet paper towel for injuries that require an ice pack.”

A Baltimore teacher who spoke to the WSWS explained that the Baltimore Teachers Union (BTU) is offering only token resistance to the reopening. The BTU has put forth a petition calling for vaccinations of all staff, unspecified ventilation upgrades, the following of “minimum public health metrics” and a “robust” testing program. The BTU, however, has not threatened a strike or any other action when none of the demands are met. The union also held a car caravan a few weeks ago and is now calling for union members to support a toothless “no confidence” vote against the CEO of Baltimore Schools, Sonja Santelises.

Reacting to the BTU’s failure to do anything meaningful, the teacher commented, “Unfortunately, it’s not surprising. It makes me wonder why we have a union at all.” She added, “Teachers feel helpless.”

Educators are not helpless, but in order to resist school reopenings they must organize independently of the unions and the Democratic Party. We urge educators, students and parents to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which is fighting to close all schools and nonessential workplaces until the pandemic is contained and the population fully vaccinated, while demanding full economic security for all workers affected by these necessary lockdowns.

On Saturday, February 27, at 3:00 p.m. Eastern, the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is holding a public meeting, “The CDC vs. Science: What Teachers, Parents, and Students Need to Know.” We urge all readers interested in stopping the reopening of schools to register and attend this important meeting.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact