

Resistance builds to school reopenings in Seattle-Tacoma metro region

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Major districts in the Seattle metro region are beginning to phase in students for in-person instruction throughout the next month. These plans are being implemented as part of the Biden administration's drive to reopen all US schools by the end of April, which is supported at every level of government in order to maximize the production of profits in the broader economy.

On February 16, Washington's Democratic Governor Jay Inslee encouraged school districts to reopen on the basis of the new politically-motivated CDC guidelines which falsely state that schools can operate safely without teacher vaccinations and at "any level of community transmission."

District officials and local media outlets are carrying out a relentless propaganda campaign based upon these CDC guidelines and other handpicked research, repeating the lies that children are less likely to infect others, that schools are not centers of spreading the virus in the broader community and that underfunded public schools can be reopened "safely."

Schools in Tacoma, a city located south of Seattle, have already begun reopening on the basis of an agreement reached by the Tacoma Education Association (TEA) and the Tacoma Public Schools. Grades K-2 are currently participating in a hybrid model, and all grades will be phased in with this hybrid model throughout the next month.

This reopening plan has already prompted opposition from a group of over 100 rank-and-file educators calling itself "Safe Return Tacoma," which held a sickout last Wednesday and is holding another "Teach Out" meeting this Wednesday.

The teachers group stated in an Instagram post: "By participating in a sick out on an asynchronous late-start Wednesday, we are having minimal negative impact on students while still being able to send a clear message to the district: look how many of your employees don't feel safe with your hybrid model!"

The group is demanding that schools remain closed until "the entire community has had access to vaccines and case counts within the Puget Sound region are below the numbers recommended for in-person learning by national, state and county health authorities," along with the enforcement of all safety guidelines and retroactive hazard pay for staff who have already had to return.

Highline School District, located between Seattle and

Tacoma, reached a tentative deal with the local union to return Pre-K, kindergarten and first grade students to "intensive academic centers" on March 11, with second and third graders returning March 22.

In Bellevue School District (BSD), located east of Seattle and home to major tech companies like Microsoft, second graders have been attending school in person at all 18 elementary schools since January 21. On March 1, first grade students and teachers are returning to classrooms at three major elementary schools, and the district and unions are working together to send third through fifth grades back in person as early as March 15.

The Bellevue Education Association (BEA) capitulated to the district's urgent demands to reopen schools after the BSD filed a lawsuit against the union for a "breach of contract" when teachers voted to halt the return of second graders in January, causing substitute teachers to take the place of regular teachers on the first day of school, January 21.

A new agreement was approved by the membership by a "narrow margin," laying out guidelines for the phased-in reopening model with certain health metrics and "school-based safety review teams." Exact dates of reopening, as well as safety measures and other details, will be adjusted over time between the district and the union.

Seattle Public Schools (SPS), the largest public K-12 district in Washington state which serves over 53,000 students in an urban area dominated by Amazon and giant tech corporations, has finalized a plan to send roughly 700 educators back into the classrooms for face-to-face instruction in the preschool Head Start program and special education services. These staff members will be required to come in to work on March 8, with students arriving in classrooms on March 11.

This final decision was made by the Seattle school board on Friday evening, which labeled these special education staff "essential" in order to force them to return without requiring an agreement between the SPS and the Seattle Education Association (SEA) teachers union.

The district first announced in December that limited instruction would begin on Monday, March 1, but negotiations are still ongoing between the district and union. Both parties agree in principle that students should return to in-person

classes as soon as possible, but they are divided over the exact terms of reopening.

This agreement will have to be voted upon by union members before it can be implemented, but it is very likely the union will do everything it can to push through the agreement as quickly as possible and prevent strike action, as Seattle teachers experienced in the 2018 and 2019 negotiations. Similarly, in early February, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) pushed through an agreement that herded staff and students back into classrooms.

In January, half of SEA's members participated in a survey, which showed that 62 percent are not ready to return until "educators have the option to be fully vaccinated." Another 37 percent of educators said they do not support reopening at all this school year, with or without vaccinations. Teachers are rightfully concerned that promises for full safety measures will not be met, given the chronic underfunding of public education, district budget shortfalls and the poor maintenance of school buildings, many of which do not have adequate ventilation.

In terms of parents' views, the *Seattle Times* reports, "A recent, limited survey of families of about 10,000 students eligible for in-person instruction under the district's reopening proposal showed a split among those ready to send their kids back into school buildings. Among parents of students with disabilities, 40% said they preferred in-person schooling, while 35% opted for remote. Twenty-three percent did not respond."

Despite this overwhelming opposition to the reopening of schools among educators and a sizable portion of parents, especially poor and working class families, the SEA tweeted on February 22: "We understand the desire to get students back to in-person—many of us are parents of SPS students too & as educators we miss seeing our students in person. SEA's bargaining team is working tirelessly to reach an agreement with SPS as quickly as we can."

Furthermore, the union is preparing the grounds to push through a reopening agreement by arguing that they are working toward guidelines that promote "racial equity" and "social justice." In a recent bargaining update, union leaders wrote: "Although our trust in the District leadership has been shattered, we remain committed to the work to reach an agreement that dismantles ableist and racist systems and lives up to our school community's words to do the strategic work that provides equity within SPS."

As much as the districts have been uncooperative with the union bargaining teams, the local Washington Education Association (WEA) affiliates, especially the SEA, are playing a key role by giving a "radical" cover to the school reopening drive and suppressing the active struggle of teachers and staff.

Educators must not accept any attempts to justify the reopening of schools, which will necessarily put themselves, students, parents and the broader community at greater risk of contracting COVID-19, suffering from severe complications and dying. These risks are heightened with the new strains and

variants of the virus that are spreading throughout the country and internationally, which are potentially more contagious and deadly.

Concealed by the mainstream media, a large body of scientific research demonstrates that children are often asymptomatic carriers of COVID-19 and can transmit it to everyone else as much as adults. Furthermore, principled scientists correctly point out that empirical data about the day-to-day spread of the virus in schools is hard to find, given the lack of systematic testing and contact tracing.

While cases and deaths have steadily fallen in Washington state since November due to limited business restrictions, there will be yet another resurgence of preventable infections and deaths if schools are reopened and restrictions dropped before vaccines are widely distributed, health care infrastructure expanded, and a mass testing and contact tracing system put in place.

A report in *Nature* magazine that analyzed data from multiple countries, titled "Ranking the effectiveness of worldwide COVID -19 government interventions," stated that "school closures in the United States have been found to reduce COVID-19 incidence and mortality by about 60 percent."

In their struggle against the reopening of schools, educators have scientific truth and a groundswell of community support among other teachers, students and working class parents across the country on their side. This mounting opposition must find expression through the building of a Washington Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, joining educators across the US and globally in developing an independent, united and scientifically-based struggle against school reopenings.

Educators have already formed these committees in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Pennsylvania, Texas, Michigan, Alabama and many other areas, which are preparing for a nationwide general strike to fight for high quality virtual instruction and the shutdown of non-essential workplaces with full compensation for affected workers. These lockdown measures must be taken until the pandemic is truly contained through the rapid distribution of vaccines in every country.

Washington educators, parents and students who support this program to prioritize human life above private profit should sign up today to get involved at wsws.org/edsafety.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact