

“The kids will bring it home to their parents and grandparents”

Co-organizer of walkout in suburban Philly school district explains opposition of parents and teachers to school reopenings

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The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is holding a meeting at 7:30p.m. EST Thursday night, March 4, to discuss the developments in Philadelphia and mobilize opposition to the deadly reopening of schools. Register now and share this link with your coworkers to build the committee! All teachers, support staff and supporters should join the network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees.

As local Democrats move forward with reopening the School District of Philadelphia, opposition continues to build among teachers and parents. On Monday, city officials announced they were moving forward with reopening more than 50 elementary schools throughout the city, after a decision was handed down by a third-party mediator appointed by the school district and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers union. Under the terms of the Memorandum of Agreement worked out by the PFT with the district, the mediator’s decision is being forced through without even the semblance of a vote by teachers, who will begin returning to classrooms as early as today in preparation for classes next week.

Both in the city and in the surrounding area, reopening plans have met with widespread opposition. In the Philly suburb of Downingtown, parents and teachers have organized a walkout today to protest the reopening of the Downingtown Area School District, which covers 12,000 students. The group, officially called the DASD Community for Metrics, Safety and Stable Learning Environment, is protesting the district’s flouting of even the minimal recommendations from CDC guidelines, which were politically motivated to conform to Biden’s demands that schools reopen by April.

In particular, teachers and parents are incensed by the district and county health department’s claim that schools can be safely reopened with teachers and children as close together as three feet apart. On their social media page, they group said, “The school district and county officials are playing with our lives and that of our children.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Tara, one of the main organizers of the walkout. Tara has two school-age children, both of whom are currently in hybrid classes. Originally starting with

three mothers, Tara organized protests and demands on Facebook, attracting more parents and teachers concerned about the safety of their lives. She said the “initial mission, beginning in December, was to close over the Holidays because the numbers were very high and safety protocols weren’t adequate.”

She continued, “Chester County is in the northwest suburbs. We have a lot of resources. Schools are great. Taxes are high [in Pennsylvania schools are funded through property taxes]. We don’t understand why the school district hasn’t put more money into virtual learning.”

“The people who want us open are COVID deniers. They want five days a week. Now the county department of health has said it is okay to go to three feet. We are still at a very high substantial risk for COVID. It is irresponsible to reopen schools five days a week. When they do open five days a week, a lot of families will be negatively impacted. The school board asked for a commitment: please commit your children to five days a week.”

Thanks to the Trump administration’s repeated denials of the grave threat posed by COVID, “The people who want five days a week have been hyper-focused, laser-focused since the summer. We were not open until October even for hybrid. We opened for hybrid. And they were upset and amplified themselves badgering school board, county, and department of health for five days.”

The parents who sent their children into schools for hybrid learning during the fall believed that CDC guidelines would be strictly followed and enforced. “The parents sending kids in were under the impression that the school district was following guidelines,” Tara said. “When is the goal post going to be moved again! People have been waiting eagerly for numbers to go down. Now they are talking about not following six feet.”

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Health, Chester County had been in the worst, “substantial” level of community transmission as defined by the state in the week ending February 26, and for most of the previous weeks as well.

“In order to let the district know how many are upset, we are not going to send our kids to school this Wednesday. Some are virtual but we are not going to have them log in! We have an attendance record so we can see.” The protest group will also “have kids take

pictures of themselves and demand six feet social distancing.”

As with schools throughout the country, Tara said that the district hasn’t been open about cases, informing parents “privately” when infections occur. They “won’t tell us which classrooms they are in. We absolutely had cases in the school, but they say they did not find evidence, so now this is why they think it is safe to be open.” The school is also not testing for asymptomatic cases, which accounts for the vast majority of cases in children, meaning the real extent of the virus in schools is likely far higher than what has been publicly admitted. She added, “The school has had dozens of shutdowns, but they say [the outbreaks aren’t] school-related.”

“We asked our school if we can get classroom notifications. They were saying it was a HIPAA violation. It is not.” In fact, the HIPAA Act, which governs the confidentiality of medical records in the United States, contains an explicit exception allowing information to be disclosed when it is necessary to prevent the spread of disease. “Other school districts are doing it. We asked the county to say, you can notify classrooms, but I don’t know the status of this,” since the county has not answered.

The county health department, similar to the new CDC guidelines released, has said “there is [scientific] support for it being moved to three feet. Absence of evidence to the contrary is not the same thing as being okay,” Tara remarked.

“The kids will bring it home to their parents and grandparents. Our grandparents are helping us watching kids when they are out of school. We have a very high Indian population and some don’t have health care. There are larger consequences [for flouting science].”

Tara also spoke about the impact it will have on children, teachers and bus drivers: “With this forecast coming up [of the new variants], why would you make any large changes to a learning model if you don’t know you can continue it? It is subjecting kids to more change and the last four months they have changed models many times. The vaccine has been a slow roll out. With teachers being vaccinated in the next four months, why would you rush into this?”

Downingtown school district “is huge and there are the issues of busing. Geographically we are a giant area and some of these kids are on the bus for 45 minutes to an hour. If you are a working parent you can’t sit in a drop lane for an hour, so they send them on bus. They will be closer than three feet,” raising the chances of kids passing it to one another, to the bus driver, and to their parents.

A survey the group sent to teachers in the district asked to rate, on a five-point scale with 5 five being the safest, how safe they feel at six-foot social distancing and then at three-foot social distancing. The response was 3.4 and 1.8, respectively.

One teacher commented on the survey: “I feel like I am constantly choosing between my family’s health and safety or coming into the building. It feels like the teachers have had no say in what happens, and yet the overarching opinion is that we ‘don’t want to do our job’...when we are trying everything possible to make the best of a bad situation and support our students. I’m not sure the district is ready to safely handle an influx of students in person.”

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was formed by teachers throughout the state last year to oppose the unsafe reopening of schools coordinated between the Democrats and the teachers’ unions, endorsed the courageous action taken in Downingtown, in comments made to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“I support the teachers of Downingtown SD and Philadelphia SD in their effort to fight back against the absurd and reckless reopening plans occurring throughout the Southeastern PA region,” a member of the committee said.

“Chester County Health Department has abdicated its responsibility to the residents and employees of both Chester and Delaware County school districts by reducing the social distancing guidance for school districts at a time when vaccine supply is seriously strained and new, more transmissible, and potentially more dangerous variants are emerging throughout the US due to the lack of response by the US Federal Government to stem the spread of COVID-19. School districts reopening for more in-person days at this point in the school year have abandoned the physical and mental health of their teachers and staff while not doing enough to ensure their employees are adequately protected.

“The Philadelphia [School District] is absurdly requiring teachers to enter unsafe buildings that have been long left to deteriorate prior to the pandemic. Even with vaccination, entry into poorly maintained spaces with no appropriate ventilation is a dangerous prospect. School districts have not been as transparent as they should be with case reporting, nor have they provided teachers and staff with adequate contact tracing, testing and the necessary flexibility to adapt to an ever-changing situation. The cruelty with which teachers have been subjected for decades has been amplified during this pandemic to inhuman heights.

“No school should be making instructional changes at this point in the school year, further disrupting teachers, students, and families as a whole. I stand with the Downingtown and Philadelphia SD teachers and staff.”



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