

California counties move to reopen schools and businesses despite pandemic risks

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Despite having the most COVID-19 infections and deaths of any state in the US, a growing number of counties in California are beginning to reopen businesses, schools and other public venues like theme parks and museums.

On Tuesday, seven more counties were lowered from the most restrictive “purple tier” to the “red tier” on the state’s “Blueprint for a Safer Economy.” The “red tier” entails a “substantial” level of risk, with 4–7 new cases per 100,000 people and a 5–8 percent test positivity rate, both of which indicate high levels of community transmission of the virus. The counties which have entered the red tier include San Francisco, Santa Clara, Napa, San Luis Obispo, Lassen, Modoc and El Dorado.

Contrary to the media barrage indicating that this move justifies the reopening of schools and businesses, this is an incredibly reckless move to take, particularly with the growing spread of more infectious and lethal variants including the now dominant CAL.20C variant. Despite these risks, large numbers of school districts have begun the process of reopening elementary schools for in-person instruction.

In San Francisco, Democratic Mayor London Breed announced on the county’s website that the red tier designation will allow middle and high schools to open. Breed’s office cynically applauded the fact that face-to-face instruction and services will be provided “to youth with disabilities, foster children, English learners, children experiencing homelessness, and children from families experiencing housing or food insecurity among others.”

Last week, the San Francisco Board of Education announced that it has reached an agreement with the United Educators San Francisco (UESF) union which mandates school reopenings as the city enters into the lower tiers. Upon reaching the red tier, schools will be opened as long as teachers have received vaccination. If the city enters into the “orange tier,” with 1–3.9 cases per

100,000 and 2–4.9 percent test positivity rate, vaccinations for educators are no longer a requirement.

The UESF, like the rest of the teachers unions, including the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), has posed no opposition to school reopenings and made as their only partial demand the vaccination of teachers. The threats placed on students, their families and the families of educators has not been raised by any of the teachers unions as they act as facilitators in carrying out the demands of the financial elite.

In addition to opening schools, indoor dining, libraries and other nonessential workplaces can reopen to 50 percent capacity, up from 25 percent capacity. Museums, zoos and aquariums will be allowed to reopen at 25 percent capacity, while movie theaters will be allowed to reopen at 25 percent capacity or 100 people, whichever is lower. Outdoor events, like sports and youth programs, will also be expanded.

San Francisco has reported more than 34,000 cases and 422 deaths since the start of the pandemic, figures that the city’s elite continue to hail as relatively low compared to the rest of the US. The city’s tourism and local economy have suffered, with businesses putting additional pressure to reopen the city.

On Tuesday, Mayor Breed announced from Pier 39, a popular tourist area in San Francisco, “I’m sure you’re tired of being cooped up in the house. And here is an incredible opportunity to enjoy your city, to come to Pier 39, to get Irish coffee—it’s St. Patrick’s Day is coming up—at Cioppino’s, to enjoy Scoma’s, some of the local businesses that have been here forever, some of the places that we all know and we all love.”

Only a few weeks ago, hospitals throughout Los Angeles and Riverside Counties in Southern California were at zero percent capacity. First responders were allowed to declare patients dead on the scene as hospitals ran out of oxygen.

These major epicenters of the pandemic are now moving to ease restrictions on gatherings and non-essential businesses as they approach the red tier. Last week, L.A. County reported 7.2 new cases per day per 100,000 people, down from 12.3 cases a week ago, and from 20 new cases a week before. Orange County's case rate was recently reported to be 7.6, down from 11.9 last week, and 20.7 the week before.

Working directly with California's Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom and district officials, the UTLA has placed Los Angeles teachers in a Catch-22, having them vote on whether or not to accept the union's safety plan which is inherently unsafe. The plan allows school reopenings upon entry into the red tier, the offering of vaccinations to teachers, and vague language regarding personal protective equipment. If teachers vote yes, they are asked to accept these conditions; if they vote no, the district will be able to hurl them into dangerous classrooms upon entry into the red tier.

Just south of Los Angeles is Riverside County, the fourth most populous county in California. Despite being in the purple tier, with a current infection rate of 11.3 per 100,000, Riverside has announced the resumption of contact sports. Multiple districts in the county will resume in-person instruction for elementary students later this month.

The Corona-Norco Unified School District in Riverside County resumed in-person classes on Monday for students in transitional kindergarten to sixth grade with a state-granted waiver that was based on lower infection rates. More school districts are expected to follow. Riverside's Temecula Valley School District is pushing forward with reopening on March 15.

The two largest districts in San Diego County are planning to expand reopening as soon as the county enters the red tier status. Sweetwater Union High School District (SUHSD) plans to send 10 percent of students back onto campuses by April 12, beginning with teachers who volunteer to teach in-person and virtual lessons.

Additionally, in a Memorandum of Understanding sent to educators on Wednesday, the district and Sweetwater Education Association (SEA) agreed to send teachers and staff from ten school sites in the district back into classrooms on May 3, due to the distribution of the vaccine having been made available for these teachers first. The date for the rest of the staff is yet to be determined. San Diego Unified School District has a tentative agreement in place with the San Diego Education Association (SDEA) to expand its reopening on

April 12.

In spite of progress made in declining coronavirus-related numbers, health officials are warning that any premature reopening can lead to a deadly resurgence of the pandemic and its variants. Dr. Anthony Fauci recently stated on CNN's "State of the Union" that the new COVID-19 variants discovered in California and New York were "worrisome." He warned against moves such as Massachusetts's recent lifting of capacity restrictions on indoor dining.

This was echoed by the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Dr. Rochelle Walensky, who said last week that the two variants "appear to spread more easily and are more contributing to a large fraction of current infections in those areas, adding urgency to the situation."

Fauci and other researchers said that the spread of the homegrown strains and the B.1.1.7 "UK" variant could lead to another strain that would evade the effects of the current vaccines. The CDC predicts that the UK variant will be the dominant strain in the US by the end of March.

The loosening of restrictions and reopening of schools in California's most restrictive tiers will create the conditions for another deadly surge. It is only through the closure of schools and nonessential workplaces, combined with a rapid vaccination of the population, that the pandemic will be halted.

It is only through the unification of educators and other sections of workers, including health care and logistics workers, that a powerful movement can be built to halt the deadly reopenings of schools.

At 2 p.m. PST this Saturday, March 6, the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees will be hosting a special event, "Unite workers to keep West Coast schools remote!" For all educators, parents and other workers interested in fighting against the reopening of schools, register to attend this important meeting!



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