

Los Angeles school district, teachers union press forward with school reopenings

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School districts throughout the greater Los Angeles area, with the complicity and active collaboration of the teachers unions, have begun introducing in-person learning at nearly every district in the county.

The Pasadena School District, which has 17,400 students in Northeastern Los Angeles County, announced plans to bring students from Pre-Kindergarten through second grade back into classrooms by the end of the month. Students in 3rd through 5th grade will join them by April 13. Long Beach Unified School District, the state's fourth largest, had earlier announced plans for elementary students to return by March 29.

Smaller districts have also introduced reopening plans or have already opened schools. South Pasadena Unified School district returned to in-person instruction for transitional kindergarten through second grade on February 18 while Compton Unified School District announced that it would be inviting students in third grade to sixth back to school this coming Monday.

Overall, 35 of the county's 80 school districts have either reopened or are actively implementing reopening plans.

Many of these districts were spurred into action by Governor Gavin Newsom's \$6.6 billion school-reopening package offering funds for schools to resume in-person instruction up to second grade by April 1. The funding bill contains an incentive pool of \$2 billion for those schools opening by April 1, with those schools missing the April 1 deadline having their funding amounts decreased by one percent per day missed.

The funds would be distributed to those districts within counties in which case rates have dropped into the "red" tier of less than 7 cases per 100,000 residents. However, the state's guidelines allow for school districts to reopen with county case rates as high as 25 per 100,000, well within the most severe "purple tier" of infections.

The push to reopen is coming the midst of the danger of

a renewed coronavirus surge. The more infectious and deadly UK, South African and Brazilian variants of the coronavirus are all present throughout the state, as well as a new strain discovered in the state of California itself. This points to the need for sufficient precautions, including closing of schools and all non-essential businesses, in order to limit the spread of infections.

The governor himself acknowledged that the state is in fact likely no longer seeing a true decline in cases but that "we are seeing a little bit of a plateau, and one needs to be mindful of that." Dr. Rochelle Walensky of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, noted during a recent press briefing that she was "deeply concerned about a potential shift in the trajectory of the pandemic." She continued, "I am really worried about reports that more states are rolling back the exact public health measures we have recommended to protect people from COVID-19."

As of Sunday, 4,912 coronavirus patients were hospitalized statewide, and over 53,000 Californians have already died. Around 22,000 of these deaths come from Los Angeles County alone.

In spite of these numbers, a great deal of emphasis has been placed by the the state's Democratic Party-led political establishment on the reopening the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the largest district in the state and the second largest in the entire country.

In order to facilitate the district's reopening, the county announced it would provide 8,800 coronavirus vaccinations to the district this week, with another 8,800 arriving next week. This comes on top of 25,000 shots delivered from the state. The combined amount is more than the 26,556 teachers working in LAUSD.

Los Angeles County public health director Barbara Ferrer has announced that the adjusted case rate reached 7.2 cases per 100,000, just slightly above the purple tier threshold and it is expected that the county will soon

announce lower case rates bringing it out of the purple tier into the red tier of infections. Mayor Eric Garcetti announced that the city would be in the red tier by next week and announced that along with schools, indoor dining will also be allowed up to 25 percent of capacity.

Garcetti has offered his help to the district in reopening and has offered the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball stadium as a mass vaccination site for teachers. “I think it’s such a reflection of how poorly this nation has gone that our children have been left behind. And that we have cardrooms that opened before classrooms did. That is inexcusable,” he said.

LAUSD superintendent Austin Beutner has himself set April 9 as the expected reopening for preschool and elementary schools. The district had already announced Wednesday that interscholastic sports will soon resume with students beginning outdoor workouts next week. Special education, child care and small-group tutoring is also already in-person based on terms set up between the district and the teachers union, the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA).

The UTLA has organized a fraudulent membership vote this week either for or against a return to in-person learning. In balloting which took place in the past week, the UTLA presented teachers with two choices. The first choice was a “Yes” vote in favor of “organizing to resist a forced return to school sites until the three conditions for safety mentioned above have been met” while a “No” vote means that teachers would be willing to return to classrooms even if those conditions were not met.

The conditions being referred to are a drop in cases below the purple tier threshold of less than 7 cases per 100,000, vaccinations made available to all teachers and safety protocols in place including Personal Protective Equipment, Social Distancing, ventilation and cleaning. In other words, the union is “demanding” that the school district implement what it is largely already doing.

More importantly, the ballot is framed in such a way that both choices accepted the need to return school in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic regardless. This is simply a maneuver to absolve the UTLA leadership of responsibility for the massive rise in coronavirus cases that will ensue.

The UTLA is copying the model of the Chicago Teachers Union, which was forced by mass opposition of teachers to returning during the pandemic to call a strike authorization vote, only to work behind closed doors with the administration of Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot to compel the reopening in early February. UTLA too

supports reopening as long as the district follows “a health metric based on CDC guidance” along with “access to vaccinations for educators, and enforceable safety standards in school buildings.”

The UTLA is working to deliberately isolate and break the unity of Los Angeles teachers, doing everything in its power to isolate teachers’ struggles. This is precisely why smaller districts such as Pasadena, Compton, Long Beach with other smaller unions agree to reopening plans, setting a precedent for the larger Los Angeles district with UTLA saying absolutely nothing about these plans.

SEIU Local 99 has already signed a deal with LAUSD to return non-teaching staff to work in advance of reopening. The UTLA has already signed off on a “voluntary” return to work which began on Thursday. In a statement, UTLA president Cecily Myart-Cruz argued, “With the number of COVID cases dipping slightly, along with the safety language bargained in the side letters, some members might be more comfortable volunteering to deliver services and/or assessments in person.”

This underscores the need for Los Angeles teachers, with teachers throughout Southern California and the West Coast, to form their own rank and file committees to oppose the school reopening drive. With even more deadly reopenings circulating throughout the state, it is imperative that schools stay shut with high quality online learning available for all students in order to keep the pandemic under control until the population is fully vaccinated.

We urge all teachers to attend the online meeting of the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, today March 6 at 2pm PST to carry this struggle forward. Register today and invite your coworkers and friends!



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