

Oregon Governor issues executive order to force teachers and students back into schools

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Oregon's Democratic Governor Kate Brown issued an executive order on March 5 to herd students and teachers back into schools for in-person learning. The order states that "all public schools will operate delivering in-person instruction through either a fully on-site or a hybrid instructional model." Kindergarten through fifth grade must reopen on or before the week of March 29, and grades 6-12 must reopen on or before the week of April 19.

This order has been issued after Brown loosened restrictions for reopening in December, then prioritized the vaccination of teachers in January. Democrats in Oregon, across the West Coast and throughout the country are scrambling to implement the Biden administration's key domestic policy of reopening all schools by the end of April.

Brown's executive order places teachers, staff and students under enormous pressure. Teachers are raising valid concerns about large class sizes, small teaching spaces and the difficulty of enforcing social distancing in schools. The mainstream media and politicians have sought to portray teachers who refuse to return as irrational, selfish and working against children's interests, attempting to pit parents against educators.

The stress has been so great that K-12 teachers' satisfaction with their employers sank from 69 percent in March 2020 to 44 percent in October. The Center for State and Local Government Excellence recorded that 38 percent of public school educators have considered quitting their jobs during the pandemic.

Teachers unions, such as the Oregon Education Association (OEA) and the Portland Association of Teachers (PAR), offer no opposition to the return to in-person instruction. None of the OEA's local affiliates have voiced any major disagreements with Brown's executive order, with OEA spokesman Rylee Ahnen

stating, "We hear, understand, and share the frustration... teachers support returning to the classroom if done safely."

Ahnen emphasized that, regardless of the executive order, most districts were already planning to move to in-person learning in the coming weeks. Twenty percent of Oregon's schools are already offering fully in-person learning, and 23 percent offer the hybrid model of both in-person and virtual learning.

While some districts like Portland Public Schools may use the executive order as a way to unilaterally push forward with a rapid reopening, the unions are encouraging the districts to continue negotiations in "good faith" since they too want to reopen quickly but hope to add a veneer of safety measures in order to wear down opposition among rank-and-file educators.

Brown tweeted on March 5, "The science is clear: with proper safety measures in place, there is a low risk of COVID-19 transmission in school." Despite the White House, school districts and unions claiming there can be a "safe" return to classrooms in the middle of the pandemic, an analysis of research done globally indicates that nothing could be further from the truth.

A consensus has emerged in Europe that children are a considerable factor in the spread of COVID-19. After schools were opened in Switzerland, the Geneva Institute of Global Health came to the conclusion that children under 10 have similar rates of transmission as older children and that children become infected as often as adults. Moreover, antibody tests showed that children 6 to 18 become infected just as frequently as young adults.

Whenever implemented, school closures have been essential in reducing infections and deaths. A study published by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* last July found a 62 percent decline in

infections per week when a state closed its schools statewide, while the mortality rate dropped 58 percent per week when schools were closed.

Dr. Peter Hotez, a vaccine researcher and dean for the national school of tropical medicine at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas, voiced serious concerns on March 5. He stated that the combination of the plateau of cases, the spread of highly transmissible new variants, and the decisions to reopen schools and the economy before the majority of the population have been vaccinated, “has all the makings of a fourth wave, and gives me a lot of pause for concern.”

On Sunday, Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, issued a sharp warning that “we are in the eye of the hurricane right now,” just before a major surge of the more infectious variants. He specifically singled out reopening schools as a dangerous policy that led to surges in infections across Europe.

Texas’ Republican Governor Greg Abbott fully opened the state last week, following the devastating ice storm, an action Mississippi quickly followed. The Biden administration’s criticisms of these full reopenings are completely hypocritical, since they are themselves conspiring with the unions to return students and teachers to in-person instruction as quickly as possible.

Governor Brown issued her executive order while the Oregon Health Authority does not know how many teachers have received the vaccine. A Johns Hopkins University analysis revealed on March 4 that no state has made public the percentage of teachers and school staff that have been vaccinated.

By backing the return to schools, the political establishment and unions are advocating a policy that could lead to a “fourth wave” of infections and deaths this spring. This is especially criminal given the ability to vaccinate the population, which will only be an effective solution if they are distributed widely and quickly while infection rates are contained at the lowest possible levels.

If the return to schools is not rational from a public health standpoint, and one could add a pedagogical standpoint with only two to three months left in the school year, then what is driving the reopening plans?

Andrew Hoan, president and CEO of the Portland

Business Alliance, recently stated the aims very clearly: “Having in-person learning allows for parents to have the opportunity to return to work, and that’s big. That’s big for emotional well-being, for financial well-being and for the betterment of our cities.” This sentiment is shared by the ruling class as a whole, which needs to resume full profit-making activity in order to pay off the debts acquired from the massive Wall Street bailout in late March 2020 through the CARES Act.

Teachers, school staff, parents, students and workers in the broader community must wage a struggle against this homicidal policy on the principle that human life is more important than private profit. On March 6, the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees met to discuss the struggle against the return to in-person instruction, stressing above all the need for educators to build their own organizations independently of the unions and both big business parties in order to unite statewide, nationally and internationally to close schools and nonessential workplaces in order to contain the pandemic.

With schools and businesses set to reopen across Oregon, Washington and California in the coming weeks, it is vital that educators and all workers form these committees and take up the fight for a national lock-down with full income compensation for workers and small businesses. We urge educators, parents and students in Oregon to contact us today to form an Oregon Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee!



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