

COVID-19 cases in Ohio schools nearly double in wake of forced reopenings

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The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is hosting an online meeting this Thursday, March 18 at 7:30pm EDT. We urge all Ohio educators to register to attend and invite your coworkers and friends, and we will assist you in the formation of an Ohio Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

Between March 1 and March 7, reported COVID-19 cases among students and faculty in Ohio's K-12 schools reached 3,058, nearly double the figure reported the previous week of 1,773 cases. The spike in cases came just two days before Republican Governor Mike DeWine's March 9 false pronouncement that "victory is in sight" in the fight against the virus. Since January, DeWine has pushed for all Ohio schools to open no later than March 1.

During the governor's address held on the one-year anniversary of Ohio's first COVID-19-related death, the governor officially named the date a "Day of Remembrance" to honor the 17,662 Ohioans who have lost their lives and the nearly one million who have tested positive in the last year. DeWine failed to mention whether March 9 is only meant to honor those who have already died or tested positive for COVID-19, or if it will also include those who will die or test positive now that schools have been forced open and all public safety measures are being lifted.

His speech was similar to the speech last week by Biden, who has pushed for a return to face-to-face learning across the country within his first 100 days in office. The reopening of schools has taken place amid the emergence of more contagious and deadly variants of COVID-19 and continued warnings by leading virologists that the US could be headed for a massive surge in cases.

The governor has aggressively pressured districts to reopen schools, including through the manipulation of

access to the vaccine. Without a district superintendent's commitment to reopen full-time, in-person school by March 1, or at least have a plan in place to do so shortly thereafter, no Ohio public school employee would qualify for the vaccine in that district, except those already meeting the age or health requirements.

A joint January letter to the governor's office by the presidents of several state teachers unions, including Columbus Education Association, Cleveland Teachers Union, Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, Toledo Federation of Teachers, Akron Education Association, Dayton Education Association, Canton Professional Educators' Association and Youngstown Educational Association—representing eight of Ohio's top nine most populous cities and all but one with a Democratic mayor—decried DeWine's methods, saying the governor "coerced" school reopenings.

The letter stated, "We are disappointed that Governor DeWine has decided to use the distribution of a life-saving vaccine as a bargaining chip, holding this precious commodity hostage while pitting parents, administrators, teachers, and other school workers, and students against each other."

While issuing denunciations, the teachers unions refuse to mount any collective action by their members. Further, their letter goes on to downplay the significance of DeWine's action, stating, "Luckily, schools don't open up just because a Superintendent signs a letter; schools open when teachers, staff, and parents collectively decide it is safe to do so."

The rush to open schools has been hampered but not slowed by the rush to vaccinate the employees of cooperating districts. Despite DeWine's March 1 deadline, district employees were not given access to the vaccine until February 1, leaving just one month to

inoculate all of the state's school employees.

The order only mandates vaccinations for staff and other school employees of cooperating districts but omits students—by far the largest part of the school population—as well as their parents. Students will be even more vulnerable than before, as DeWine's school reopening guidelines stipulate that those who are exposed to COVID-19 while wearing a mask are no longer required to quarantine or sit out extracurricular activities.

The safety of educators, students, parents and their communities is further compromised by the common practice of school districts contracting food and custodial staff from private vendors. Because they are not employed by the district, these staff members are not automatically eligible for the vaccine. Food and custodial workers may attempt to independently register for the vaccine, claiming the essential nature of their work, but this type of registration is by no means guaranteed and could be delayed given the condensed timetable for school openings. As a result of these policies, in most schools those who will have gotten vaccinated will be an overwhelming minority.

DeWine's declaration that "the end is in sight" is highly dubious given current trends in both Ohio and nationwide. As of March 11, before the recent spike was recorded, 75 percent of Ohio counties, 66 of 88, were listed as "Red," meaning "very high exposure and spread." These numbers are likely to increase, given the recent school outbreaks and the fact that those counties that have dipped below "Red" levels are far removed from urban centers with the densest general and school populations. Cincinnati tops the list of new reported cases, with Columbus just behind, and it is likely that other districts in Ohio's major metropolitan centers will soon witness a spike in cases.

Further compounding the danger of rolling back safety restrictions is the emergence of new COVID-19 variants in the state. As of March 8, 31 cases of the B.1.1.7 variant, originating in the UK, have been reported in Ohio, and the first case of the P.1 variant, originating in Brazil, was also recently reported.

In addition to his efforts to undermine school safety, the governor also put a timetable on the lifting of public and workplace restrictions. Within two months, he expects to fully lift all curfew and other restrictions that have not already been done away with, while removing

all public mask mandates.

Last year DeWine was a relatively early adopter of COVID-19 restrictions among US governors, but his about-face in regard to workplace and school closures shows his allegiance to the ruling class's demand for profits over lives. Ohio is joining many other states in downplaying the ongoing danger of COVID-19, both in schools and other public and private places.

The homicidal policy of reopening schools and nonessential workplaces amid a deadly pandemic has exposed that both the Democratic and Republican politicians are completely indifferent to the lives of educators, students and all workers in the communities they claim to represent.

Educators, parents and students determined to fight against this policy are coming into confrontation with the teachers unions that have either passively accepted or collaborated in the reopening of schools. The *World Socialist Web Site* encourages all Ohio educators who oppose the reopening of schools to link up with educators in the expanding network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees across the country and internationally. Send us your contact information today to begin building such a committee in Ohio !



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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