

Oregon educators: Unite to halt the reopening of schools and save lives!

Oregon Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
16 March 2021

We urge all educators, students, parents and workers who support the fight against the reopening of schools and dangerous conditions to register for the next meeting of the Oregon Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee this Sunday, March 21 at 10:00 a.m. PDT. You can also sign up to join our committee [here](#). We also encourage everyone to attend the meeting of the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees this Saturday, March 20 at 2:00 p.m. PDT.

In opposition to the rush to reopen Oregon schools for all grades by April 19, educators and parents are uniting to take action. We are launching the Oregon Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to defend the health and well-being of *all* students, staff and the working class as a whole.

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 demands that kindergarten through fifth grade reopen on or before the week of March 29, and grades six through 12 must reopen on or before the week of April 19. Washington's Democratic Governor Jay Inslee followed Brown's lead and yesterday signed a similar emergency proclamation.

With the active participation of the Oregon Education Association (OEA), Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) and other local affiliates, districts are hurrying to put Brown's order into effect. Portland Public Schools, the largest district in the state, reached a deal on Monday with PAT to phase in elementary students starting April 1 and middle and high school students by April 19 as ordered by Brown.

Salem-Keizer School District began sending elementary students back to schools at the beginning of March. Other major districts, including in Beaverton, North Clackamas and Eugene, also established plans to reopen schools and are now speeding up the process.

What is taking place in Oregon is part of the bipartisan effort to herd children back into classrooms. Governments around the world are facilitating a fourth wave of infection by rushing to reopen schools and non-essential workplaces. Implementing one of Biden's top domestic policy proposals, nearly every district across the US has announced plans to return to some form of in-person learning by the end of April.

The primary motivation behind this irrational campaign to reopen schools is to get parents back to work so that the wider economy can reopen and corporations can resume profit-making. Andrew Hoan, president and CEO of the Portland Business Alliance, bluntly expressed this underlying motive, saying, "Having in-person learning allows for parents to have the opportunity to return to work."

The science supports keeping schools online

March 11 marked one year since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 crisis a global pandemic, in which time nearly 120 million people have been infected and over 2,650,000 have died worldwide. Although the pandemic could have been contained in the first months of 2020 with an internationally-coordinated public health response, governments worldwide kept businesses and schools open under a policy best described as "malign neglect." In the US, this policy has resulted in over 30 million infections and over 548,000 deaths, including 2,324 deaths in Oregon, a state with a population of 4.2 million.

Additionally, Oregon has reported 17 cases of the more virulent B.1.1.7 variant, first identified in the UK, as well as one case of the P.1 variant prevalent in Brazil. Disturbingly, the state has just identified an apparently new variant, containing characteristics of both the UK and Brazil variants.

Last week, University of Minnesota epidemiologist Dr. Michael Osterholm warned, "Every governor wants to open schools. And I understand that. ... But the problem is, if you look at Europe, right now the challenge we're seeing is a lot of transmission in schools with this new variant. ... We're going to have some tough days ahead in the older population and in the younger population with this new variant virus."

Even the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Dr. Rochelle Walensky, stated recently, "I think the next two or three months could go in one of two directions. If things open up, if we're not really cautious, we could end up with a post-spring-break surge the way we saw a post-Christmas surge. We could see much more disease. We could see much more death."

There is a relentless propaganda campaign to spread misinformation and lies about how "safe" it is to reopen schools, with the latest CDC guidelines arguing that in-person learning can resume regardless of community transmission or staff vaccination levels. Knowing that educators deeply care for their students, politicians and media outlets are utilizing the emotional, educational and social hardships that children are facing to gaslight teachers into accepting the unsafe return to schools.

However, scientific research from across the world demonstrates the effectiveness of school closures to combat the spread of the virus, with a November report published in *Nature* magazine noting, "school closures in the United States have been found to reduce COVID-19 incidence and mortality by about 60 percent." A study by the Illinois Department of Public Health using contact tracing found that more

than one-fifth of potential exposures occurred in schools, while similar figures in Michigan show schools to be the top source of COVID-19 outbreaks.

Further evidence shows that COVID-19 spreads most readily in small, poorly-ventilated indoor spaces, a perfect description of classrooms in the underfunded public education system. We are under no illusions that the token safety measures promised by our districts and unions will actually be met. Further, we recognize that children are just as likely to spread the virus as adults and can still experience severe complications and die, even if they are less likely to show symptoms.

Educators are taking action to save lives!

We have formed the Oregon Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee on the basis of science, public health and concern for the safety of the broader community, and we urge all educators and supportive parents to join us. The purpose of our committee is to unite Oregon educators with health care, transportation, manufacturing, logistics, retail and other workers to prepare collective action to stop the murderous policy of reopening schools in the midst of a global pandemic that is not contained.

This includes the preparation of a general strike to shut down schools and nonessential workplaces, with full compensation for all affected workers and small business owners, and demand the resources needed to vaccinate the population, address the critical social needs of poor and working-class families, and provide high-quality remote learning until the pandemic is under control.

We know the unions will not carry forward the struggle that is required to win these demands, since they are on the same team as the Democratic Party politicians who are facilitating the rush to return! Despite their attempts to hide behind references of “safety” and “equity,” the Democrats and the Biden administration are continuing the basic pandemic policies pursued by Trump.

Our committee is entirely independent of the unions and both the Republicans and Democrats. We are led by rank-and-file teachers who defend the non-negotiable rights of health and safety. On the basis of this strategy, and in unity with our fellow educators across the West Coast and globally, we advance the following demands:

- For the immediate closure of all public, private and charter schools and all nonessential production to stop the spread of COVID-19.
- All decisions about school openings and closures must be overseen solely by rank-and-file educators and parents in consultation with scientific experts of their choosing.
- Full funding for internet access, technology and all resources needed for high-quality remote instruction.
- Materials provided to all families in their primary language and adequate accommodations for kids with special needs to better facilitate student support at home.
- Full income protection to all parents and caregivers who stay home with their children.
- No loss of income for educators and staff members who choose to stay home.
- For free speech and the protection of whistleblowers.
- Cancellation of all standardized tests through the remainder of 2021.

While opposing the reckless reopening of schools, we recognize that in many cases teachers are being forced back in. Under these conditions, we will continue to fight for school closures while demanding that the following safety measures be universally implemented:

- Weekly COVID-19 testing for all staff and students and a robust contact tracing system.
- Districts and schools must report numbers (not names to ensure privacy) of students, staff, and associated household members diagnosed with COVID-19 and any associated deaths, which must be tracked through mandatory testing and contact tracing.
- The immediate modernization of HVAC systems for all schools.
- Hiring additional nurses, counselors and mental health professionals.
- Full protective gear, especially for teachers who are working with young children and kids with disabilities.
- The mass hiring of teachers and bus drivers to reduce class sizes and bus capacity to no more than 10 students, and five students for intensive Special Education classrooms.

The Oregon Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee rejects the lie that there is no money for these life-saving necessities. From the beginning of the pandemic, the concern of the political establishment has been to shore up the stock market and the private fortunes of the corporate and financial oligarchy that runs America.

American billionaires have seen their wealth grow by \$1.4 trillion in the past year of death and disease, mainly by capitalizing on the March 2020 bailout of Wall Street and the continual rise of the stock market. Phil Knight, the founder of Oregon-based Nike Inc., increased his net worth by over 66 percent during the pandemic, bringing his net worth to over \$49 billion. The private fortunes of Knight and all the pandemic profiteers should be used for the social benefit of the population as a whole.

Get involved!

This catastrophe can be stopped! Through rational and scientific action on the part of the working class, infection rates can be slowed. Every measure must be taken to immediately contain the virus and save as many lives as possible until the vaccine becomes widely available.

We call on all educators and support staff, bus drivers, paraprofessionals, nurses, secretaries, classroom aides, janitors, cooks, school psychologists, social workers and workers from all industries, to join our network and build rank-and-file safety committees in your school or workplace.

Fill out the “Join” form at wsws.org/edsafety. Whether you are a teacher or other school worker, an autoworker, health care worker, or you work in another industry, we will put you in touch with a committee in your industry or help you establish a new one.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact