

Biden administration distorts science to reopen US schools

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The ruling class campaign to reopen schools and the broader economy across the US and globally is deepening each day, in tandem with growing efforts to distort science to suit this political agenda. In the US, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is expected to announce a modification to its guidelines on school reopenings Friday, lowering its recommendation that students be spaced six feet apart to only three feet.

The rush to fully reopen schools and workplaces takes place under conditions in which more infectious and lethal variants of COVID-19 are spreading uncontrolled throughout the world and the pandemic is nowhere near contained. In the US, daily new cases have leveled off at roughly 55,000, far above the average for most of 2020, while over 1,000 people continue to die each day. There are indications of a significant increase in some areas, including across Michigan, where the statewide case rate is now 50 percent higher than in February.

The updated CDC guidelines are meant to facilitate the Biden administration's goal of opening the majority of K–8 schools by the end of April, and are clearly being coordinated with the White House. On Wednesday, the Department of Education announced that it will host a “National Safe School Reopening Summit” on March 24, featuring first lady Jill Biden, Education Secretary Miguel Cardona and CDC Director Rochelle Walensky.

In damning testimony at a House committee hearing on Wednesday, Walensky made clear that science is being manipulated in order to pack the schools with children. She said cynically, “As soon as our guidance came out [last month], it became very clear that six feet was among the things that was keeping schools closed, and in that context science evolves.”

In a Senate committee hearing Thursday, Walensky stated, “Because six feet has been such a challenge, science has leaned in and there are now studies of three feet versus six feet. I’m aware of several that will be released in the next few days and we will update that guidance.” In response, Susan Collins (Republican of Maine) demanded, “You need to do it now.”

In justifying the CDC’s loosening of its guidelines, Walensky cited a study published last week in *Clinical Infectious Diseases* which she claimed “demonstrated in Massachusetts where there is generally 100 percent mask-wearing that three

feet was actually safe.”

Far from being “safe,” the study reveals that in the 251 school districts observed, “4,226 cases were reported in students and 2,382 in school staff.” Like Walensky, the study’s authors brush this aside and recommend three-foot spacing in schools. The study did not involve contact tracing or surveillance testing and was conducted prior to the spread of the more infectious and lethal B.1.1.7 variant of the virus, rendering it flawed and irrelevant.

Brown University economist Emily Oster—who has no background in epidemiology and is one of the foremost advocates of school reopenings—was a co-author of the study. Last October, Oster wrote the dubious *Atlantic* article, “Schools Aren’t Super-Spreaders,” which the corporate media, as well as then-Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and the CDC, cited to justify school reopenings throughout the US. On Thursday, the *Atlantic* again published a piece by Oster, titled, “Go Ahead, Plan a Family Vacation With Your Unvaccinated Kids.”

In her latest piece, Oster repeats the lies of Trump, Biden, the CDC, the media and the teachers’ unions, stating, “Children are not at high risk for COVID-19,” adding that “kids seem to be naturally protected.” She blithely concludes, “We should be able to return to some normalcy well before our kids get a vaccine.”

The arguments of Oster, Walensky and all the officials pressing for schools to reopen do not withstand serious scrutiny. Schools have long been recognized as centers for most types of viral transmission, and the airborne coronavirus is no exception. The claims that dilapidated public schools are miraculously exempt from the laws of physics and aerosolization defy all logic, and the most rigorous scientific studies prove that keeping schools closed is a pillar of any strategy to contain the pandemic and save lives.

According to the latest data from the American Academy of Pediatrics, as of March 11 over 3.28 million children have tested positive for COVID-19 in the US, itself an undercount given that children are more likely to be asymptomatic. The vast majority of these cases have been detected since the fall, when schools began reopening.

A significant study published last week in *The Lancet* noted:

“Primary and secondary school closures have been associated with substantial reductions over time in the effective reproduction number (Rt) across many countries (including England) and time periods.”

Commenting on the dangers posed to children by the reopening of schools, the authors write: “Although COVID-19 is unlikely to cause severe disease in children, estimates of the prevalence of long COVID symptoms based on the ONS Infection Survey suggest that 13 percent of children aged 2–10 years and 15 percent of those aged 12–16 years have at least one persistent symptom 5 weeks after testing positive.”

The authors conclude: “Given uncertainty around the long-term health effects of SARS-CoV-2 infection, it would be unwise to let the virus circulate in children, with consequent risk to their families... By contributing to high community transmission, it also provides fertile ground for virus evolution and new variants.”

In Michigan and Illinois, recently reopened schools have become the primary source of COVID-19 outbreaks in both states after their Democratic governors pressed schools to reopen. Michigan has documented 616 cases of the B.1.1.7 variant, the second-highest figure among all states.

Despite the feigned concern of politicians and officials for the well-being of children, the underlying motive behind the reopening of schools is to compel parents to return to unsafe workplaces in order to boost corporate profits and sustain the unending inflation of the stock market. This was stated most bluntly by Biden’s top economic advisor, Brian Deese, who said in January, “We need to get the schools open so that parents... can get back to work.”

The pandemic has exposed the thoroughgoing corruption of capitalist society, which subordinates the social needs of the working class to the profit interests of the financial oligarchy.

The entire political establishment, official scientific institutions, the corporate media, the trade unions and large sections of academia are all deeply implicated in the “herd immunity” policies that have resulted in the infection of more than 30 million people and the deaths of more than 550,000 in the US alone. American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten bears more responsibility than any other figure for the school reopenings that have taken place everywhere, recently telling the *New York Times* that she spends 15 hours each day coordinating this campaign.

At the opposite pole of society, the working class is increasingly determined to struggle against the policies of “social murder” demanded by the ruling elites. Among educators, there is intense opposition to the reopening of schools, which has been disastrous wherever it has taken place. In Los Angeles and Oakland, educators are presently voting on whether to accept deadly deals to resume in-person learning negotiated by the teachers unions, which, if rejected, could spark broader opposition throughout the country.

The fact that the school reopening campaign is now

spearheaded by Biden and the Democrats, with the fulsome support of the teachers unions, is producing growing disillusionment in these institutions, which have long held sway among educators.

Over the past year, with the support of the Socialist Equality Parties, educators and other sections of workers across the US and globally have built rank-and-file committees independent of the capitalist political parties and corporatist unions.

These committees are developing into powerful centers of working class militancy and expanding their reach internationally. In the US alone, such committees now exist among autoworkers at plants throughout the Midwest, Amazon workers in Baltimore, and educators in New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Diego, Northern California, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Alabama and Texas. Educators in Oregon formed a committee this week and there is interest in building committees in other states.

The development of these democratically controlled action committees is necessary to prosecute the class struggle and counter the ruling class response to the pandemic with a scientifically grounded program based on the closure of all schools and nonessential workplaces, while providing full economic security for all workers affected.

The most critical task, however, is the building of a revolutionary socialist leadership within the working class, armed with the theoretical and historical understanding of the Marxist movement. The pandemic has once again laid bare the outmoded and irrational character of world capitalism, and the irreconcilability of the class antagonisms between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This social system must be consciously overthrown by the international working class in order to rebuild society on socialist foundations.



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