

# Pandemic threatens to explode in Massachusetts as Baker administration forces schools open

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Boston Public Schools (BPS) is on track to provide five days of in-person learning in all schools beginning in April. The Boston Teachers Union (BTU) paved the way for this in January by signing an antidemocratic Memorandum of Agreement allowing thousands of students to return to classrooms. High-needs students began in-person learning on February 1. On March 1, students in K0–Grade 3 returned in two, two-day groups, followed by Grades 4–8 on March 15, also in two groups. High school students will return to in-person classes in two groups beginning March 29.

On March 5, an undemocratic vote of the majority governor-appointed Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) adopted amendments giving Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Commissioner Jeff Riley unhindered authority to determine when district-wide hybrid and remote learning models no longer count for structured learning time. This gives Riley the “force of the law” to pry districts open regardless of local democratic decisions, logistical safety, scientific recommendations and, ultimately, the threat to the lives and health of an untold number of people.

The school reopenings will be enforced statewide in three phases, with Grades K–5 beginning full-time, in-person, five days a week starting April 5; Grades 6–8, April 28; and with plans for Grades 9–12 forthcoming some time in April.

As of yet, parents and students will still retain the option for remote or hybrid learning for the remainder of the school year. But the goal of the current push, and the plans of DESE and the state, is to no longer allow families any option in fall 2021, save for students with medical exemption. Riley, DESE and Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker present these murderous directives as beneficial for children, falsely claiming that “the science is clear” that it is safe to reopen schools.

Baker and Riley have been pushing to reopen schools in one form or another since they were initially closed in

March 2020. While both claim they are acting out of concern for child welfare, school reopenings are a key element of the broader government policy in the US and internationally to drive parents back to work and resume profit-making for the financial aristocracy, whatever the cost in human life.

On June 25, 2020, DESE issued its “initial fall school reopening guidance,” based on cherry-picked and incomplete initial studies from the early stages of the pandemic that claimed children do not catch or spread COVID-19 easily. Since that time, countless studies have been conducted showing the contrary to be true. With hospitals once again nearing full capacity and new, more infectious and lethal variants emerging which spread more easily in children, both Riley and Baker are continuing their homicidal back-to-school drive.

This past September, Riley sent a threatening letter to school committee chairs in 16 schools that were operating remotely, threatening “an audit to assess overall efforts to provide in-person instruction” if they failed to provide a report on reopening plans within 10 days. By October, as cases were beginning to rise to over 1,000 cases per day, Riley audited the East Longmeadow and Watertown school districts, saying he was concerned the districts were not “aligning [their] reopening model” with town or city public health metrics, based on the state’s formula for calculating infection rates and transmission risk. State officials then changed their formula in November in a number of ways, including no longer counting “probable cases” of COVID-19.

As a result, the number of “high risk” or “red zone” districts went from 121 to 16 overnight. On November 6, the same week the changes were made, Baker claimed: “At this point there is clear and convincing scientific data that shows children are at significantly less risk of developing serious health issues from exposure to COVID-19, and there is clear and convincing scientific data that shows learning in a classroom, as long as people are playing by the rules, does

not lead to higher transmission rates.”

On November 24, with cases at 3,000 per day in the state with no signs of slowing, Riley sent more letters to district leaders of the state’s three largest districts—Boston, Springfield and Worcester—asking for more information on their reopening plans and once again threatened audits depending on their response.

In Wareham, a town of 20,000 located 18 miles to the east of the economically devastated city of New Bedford, public schools have presently split in-person students into two cohorts, each attending school two times per week, one on Mondays and Tuesdays and the other on Thursdays and Fridays. The upcoming reopening in April will force full-time, daily in-person instruction for all students.

Deanna Semple, president of the Wareham Education Association, said the commissioner’s mandate was made “without a concern as to social distancing, staff welfare, building space, sufficient teachers and staff—without a care for any of it.” But when science is molded to the needs of the capitalist class and profit accumulation, not as a method of guiding a social response to eradicate the pandemic, Riley need not concern himself with such mitigating factors.

In Wareham, as will become the norm in schools across the state, the minimum mandated distance between students will be three feet, a halving of the six feet previously required. On Friday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) relaxed the six-foot distancing rule for elementary school students, saying that they need only remain three feet apart as long as everyone is wearing a mask, a claim with no basis in science that places the lives of students, teachers and the wider community at risk.

In fact, the focus on physical distancing ignores the fact that COVID-19 is mostly spread through tiny airborne particles produced by the act of breathing. These “droplets” accumulate in poorly ventilated areas. Only the most modern and well-maintained HVAC systems can significantly mitigate airborne transmission.

Official science, like “official” governor-appointed boards, aids the effort to fill classrooms. According to DESE’s website, the “Board” that voted to give Riley absolute power to reopen schools “includes the secretary of education, a student (the president of the State Student Advisory Council), and nine members appointed by the governor. Those members must include a parent representative, a labor representative, and a business representative.”

By providing the appearance of democratic decision-making, governor-appointed boards such as the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority’s (MBTA’s) Fiscal and Management Control Board play a key role in pushing

through the agenda of the state’s political elite. Of note, in the March 5 vote of 8–3 in favor of giving Riley executive powers, the three votes against the amendments came from the teacher, parent and student representatives on the board.

The pseudo-medical signatories of the February letter also take no account of the dangerous new variants, particularly B.1.1.7, a far more contagious variant introduced to the US in late 2020, whose prevalence has been doubling approximately every 9.8 days in the US and will soon be the dominant strain as schools reopen. The prevalence of B.1.1.7 has been increasing at an alarming rate in many European countries, including Portugal and Ireland, which, like the UK, have seen devastating waves of COVID-19 after B.1.1.7 became dominant.

The opening of schools is giving this and other variants a perfect breeding ground and means of spreading in the public at large, already seen in the correlation of school reopenings and the increasing prevalence of B.1.1.7. At every turn, the response of the unions to the homicidal drive to reopen schools, both in Massachusetts and across the country, has been to seek to head off resistance of rank-and-file educators with mealy-mouthed statements of protest and public opposition stunts, followed by agreements handing control of school reopenings to local mayors and state governors.

Decisions on school and workplace reopenings must be taken out of the hands of the unions and politicians of both big business parties. Teachers and other workers in Massachusetts and beyond should build rank-and-file safety committees, joining forces with the network of committees being formed in the US and internationally to fight the dangerous reopening of schools and nonessential workplaces.



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