

Philadelphia school closed for COVID outbreak 10 days after reopening

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The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee stands for the end of all in-person instruction and the closing of all nonessential businesses until the pandemic is contained. Click here to join the Committee and read our latest statement here. Please register for our next meeting on Thursday, March 25 at 7:30 p.m. EDT.

Philadelphia officials were forced to close one of their school buildings due to an outbreak of COVID-19 less than 10 days after reopening the city's schools.

Since reopening schools earlier this month, the city of Philadelphia has seen a 16 percent increase in the 7-day average of new infections. Statewide, Pennsylvania has a staggering 976,000 confirmed cases and over 24,749 deaths over the course of the pandemic, worse on a per-capita basis than both Florida and California.

Mayfair Elementary was one of 53 schools opened on March 8 in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) after being certified "safe" by a committee of the teachers union. On March 17, a COVID outbreak was detected at the school and officials announced that the building would be closed to all students and staff until April 1.

The School District of Philadelphia (SDP) is not making any effort to monitor these cases and the extent of community spread, including possible deaths that will result. Officials refused to provide any details on the outbreak, including how many were infected and whether students, staff or both were among those confirmed cases.

A parents and teachers group which has been publishing its own data on a crowdsourcing site has found a total of 35 cases since schools reopened including 5 at Mayfair and another school with at least 4 confirmed cases. On Facebook, a parent concluded that there had to have been several cases at Mayfair, reasoning that there were two cases at her school but it had not shut down.

However, even as the school officials announced it had to close one of its schools, it is moving ahead with its plans to reopen all in-person education. This past Monday, 45 additional schools were opened and another 35 schools have been cleared to reopen this coming Monday, March 22.

Also on Monday, school officials will announce opening dates for the remaining buildings for all 3,000 Pre-K through

2nd grade students.

The reopenings take place after the teachers union, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), struck a rotten deal with the School officials to reopen schools. Under the agreement, certain schools were certified "safe" by the union. Teachers themselves were never consulted or allowed to vote before the agreement was implemented.

Underscoring the collaboration of the PFT with the school district, the district published on their web site that it is the PFT which is certifying the schools are safe and okay to reopen.

"The PFT will continue its school readiness reviews, with the goal of announcing the return dates for the remaining schools serving PreK-2 students by March 22nd, 2021. Once readiness reviews for all PreK-2 schools are completed, the PFT will begin reviews for the remaining schools serving students in third through 12th grade," superintendent William R. Hite Jr., Ed.D., wrote on the SDP website.

"The union doesn't care about us or our students," stated a high school teacher. "How can they be sending us back into school? People are going to be dying because of this."

One teacher who felt it was still unsafe and did not want to return said that the PFT told them they would be suspended without pay. Another teacher remarked, "Look at the photo evidence of the real conditions of buildings. What's with the PFT buying into the school district's propaganda. Where is our representative from our union, when the SDP lied about the conditions? I thought the PFT went into these buildings and approved their conditions. If so, it's disgraceful."

Mayfair Elementary itself was only opened for 2nd graders because overcrowding at the school meant that there was no room for Pre-K, kindergarten or the first grade students.

"I'm not going back," said one teacher. "I was supposed to report back on March 15. The School District sent me a letter saying that I had to return. I feel that they can't make it safe for me, my students and their families. The union is not fighting for us at all."

In social media comments, several teachers explained that the in-person teaching actually makes their job more difficult. "The students are just sitting at their desks with laptops taking part in the same virtual learning as those who are at home. However, since they are in the room, we have to wear our masks and

stand behind our shields. So now the students can't see facial expressions, we can't move around or use our teaching aids."

The situation with medical supplies in the buildings is chaotic, with nurses reporting missing personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies in addition to the generally filthy character of the buildings. One nurse said that the test kits they were sent were outdated and they were told to extend their expiration date until June. A staff member reported that when they went for their testing, they were told that their tests were expired but were not given another day or time to report for testing.

Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, which is providing the vaccine and testing for the school district, has not responded to requests for comments for this story.

Elsewhere in the state, Pittsburgh Public Schools has announced plans to reopen for in-person teaching April 6. Pittsburgh is the state's second largest school district with 25,000 students. Pennsylvania Democratic Governor Tom Wolf announced that the state would lift restrictions on restaurants, bars and gyms along with other forms of indoor entertainment. Under the new guidelines, restaurants can seat patrons at 75 percent of capacity and bars can be reopened.

After Trump and the Republicans spearheaded this policy last fall, Biden and the Democrats have taken up the mantle of reopening schools as part of the broader effort to get people back to work producing profits for Wall Street. On Tuesday, President Biden made a stop in the Philadelphia area to promote his stimulus package alongside the reopening of schools and businesses.

"I find it very hypocritical that from one day to the next we are being given different information about what is safe and what isn't from the CDC and Dr. Fauci," said a Philadelphia area bus driver and member of the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. "On the one side they say that people need to keep wearing masks, on the other it is OK for students to be in school and just 3 feet apart.

"Wolf has okayed the opening of bars, restaurants and gyms just as states that have reopened are starting to spike again and new variants are spreading. This morning I heard them say that another 360,000 people will die by July if we don't wear masks and drop social distancing, so how can they say it is safe to reopen schools?

"It is totally idiotic. We can mediate this pandemic, if we keep things shut down long enough to allow for everyone to get their shots. If we don't it is only going to get worse and if the new variants don't respond to the shots we will be starting all over again.

"All they care about is getting the kids back into the schools so that we can go back to work so that the corporations can make money. They don't care about our lives or the children's lives.

"It is outrageous that we pay union dues when the unions just do the corporate bidding. They always side with the

corporations, they don't help the workers. They play for the company.

A Philadelphia-area high school teacher, who is also a member of the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, said, "The union leaders are pushing us back into the classrooms. They don't represent us. The union leaders, the school district leadership, the local and state officials are all willing to put people's lives at risk for money. Everyone who is behind the opening of the schools is willing to kill people. They say that the risk of death is ok.

"The vaccine is out there, there is no reason to put people at risk when we can keep things closed until every person is vaccinated. We have the power to overcome this. I don't want to see people die.

"We are fighting for no more schools to open. The district is planning on having summer school. We have a vaccine. I've read of two studies being conducted, one on children and the other with teenagers. They should have results by midsummer. Instead of doing this Mickey-Mouse summer program, they should concentrate on getting every teacher and every student and their households vaccinated and then we can return to school in the fall.

"These people who are opening schools, they are willing to kill people. We the workers have the power to stop this. This is what the Rank-and-File committees are doing. We are seeking to unite the workers. The Democrats lie to the people, they tell us they care and then they push the schools to be open. At least the Republicans don't lie, they come right out and tell the people that they are against them."

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is the only force organizing the opposition of teachers to the deadly betrayals of the unions. We are part of a growing network of committees throughout the US and worldwide which are democratically controlled by their members.

These committees work to unite educators with Amazon and other transportation workers, workers in auto and basic industry, and all sections of the working class, to fight for a shutdown of schools and nonessential industry in order to contain the pandemic. We urge all Philadelphia educators to sign up today to join and help build this committee as your organization!



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