

“It was completely careless to open up schools in New York City and everywhere else”

New York City charter school threatens to fire educators who refuse to teach in-person

Our reporters

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Public Prep, a charter school network in New York City that teaches pre-K, primary and middle school students, has threatened to fire teachers who do not teach in-person classes for two weeks a month.

According to teachers, administrators told them in virtual meetings that anyone who refused to return would be terminated. To ensure that teachers come into buildings, administrators have arbitrarily declared “blackout days” during which educators will not be paid for taking sick days or time off for family responsibilities. In some cases, blackout days have been applied retroactively.

The demand comes as more infectious variants of the coronavirus now comprise over half of all new infections recently tested in the city. On Sunday, one person was diagnosed with the deadly P.1 variant first discovered in Brazil. Nevertheless, yesterday, public high schools resumed face-to-face instruction for the first time in a year, as part of the Biden administration’s campaign to rapidly reopen schools in order to compel parents to return to unsafe workplaces. While New York City’s test positivity rate remains at roughly 7 percent, 25 zip codes have positivity rates of 10 percent or more.

Public Prep, which has generally followed the public school opening and closing policies during the pandemic, opened up its schools for full-time face-to-face instruction on March 1. The charter’s reopening plan is a hybrid model for teachers, but seeks to maintain fully in-person classes for students. To do so, the network has hired part-time staff, who make an hourly wage of \$20 an hour, have no work protections or health care benefits and are required to come to school five days a week.

Many of the full-time staff at the schools are new teachers, graduate students, or teachers who are not certified in New York but are in other states. They are under tremendous pressure to ensure student achievement and are told that if

they do not perform their jobs to an amorphous “standard” they may be terminated.

Public Prep Network was founded in 2005 with a single school, Girls Prep, in the Bronx, marketing itself to some of the poorest New York families as a college-oriented alternative to the decaying public school system. The charter school network now has six schools at five different locations in the Bronx and Lower East Side of Manhattan, with over 2,000 students, a section of the 138,000 students who attend 267 privately-owned but publicly-funded charters that have been established in New York City since 1998.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a Public Prep educator about the conditions in her school. She requested anonymity for the interview.

WSWS: This was your first week in the school, correct?

Public Prep teacher: “It was rough. We have entrance procedures where the students have to wash their hands. And because not everyone was there, more work was put on the staff that were present.

“They keep the kids in all day. We are told to have the doors open, have a couple of windows open and turn on the AC to provide ventilation. Students are only allowed to remove their masks to eat or drink water. The students are not allowed to talk with their masks down. They are not allowed to get up, really, unless it’s for gym class or dance class. The expectation is that the students are sitting down all day with their mask down and facing toward their sneeze guard, which is pretty much a plastic folder.

“The students hate being in school because they can’t go outside and play. Because of this, the students have been violating pretty much every COVID rule. They get close to each other, still touch each other’s stuff. Sometimes they pull their mask out to stick their tongue out just to be defiant.

The kids are frustrated with everything, because they are in school but they can't do anything they used to do in school.

"A lot of the [teacher] aides are stressed. The students don't listen to them because the aides are new. And the aides are either very young, with many in college, or they are older and near retirement. So, the younger ones don't know how to handle kids but they have energy. The older ones do know but they do not have energy. One aide is complaining because she's on a cane, but because she is listed as an aide she is not allowed to sit down. So, she has to stand with a cane all day."

WSWS: Have you heard that in Michigan, the largest single source of outbreaks is in schools? The B.1.1.7 strain from the UK is spreading in Michigan schools, and is spreading across Florida. Over half of the new cases in New York City recently have been variants.

Teacher: "I think it was completely careless to open up schools in New York City and pretty much everywhere else, when we know that even the vaccines can't fully protect you against the variants. I understand that right now there is evidence that vaccination will at least protect you from death. But COVID has shown even if it doesn't kill someone, there can be permanent damage to the lungs, to the brain, to the heart which are all sensitive organs.

"I saw something a friend posted on Facebook where someone lost all sensation in their body because of COVID. For people to treat this as a super-flu, I find that insane. The flu kills plenty of people every year but COVID has well surpassed flu deaths.

"And to be quite honest, I've never heard of anyone having permanent damage after the flu but that's happening with COVID. Right now, I'm on my way to get the second vaccination shot, but some of these strains essentially nullify the vaccine effects.

"We only have these strains because around the world no one wants to consider this an emergency. They want to treat it like something that we just get over, that we can open everything up. If we had listened to the CDC, to the WHO and all these other medical institutions that said to shut everything down, it was only supposed to be two weeks to a month. If we had listened to that and worn masks and followed protocols, maybe we wouldn't have seen so many variants.

"But the truth is, now we have these variants and instead of taking the variants seriously we are opening up everything. Madison Square Garden is open, movie theaters are open, restaurants are increasing capacity to 50 percent. It feels like the worse COVID gets, the less seriously it is taken. Sometimes I wonder if they want people to die. And that's really how I feel about it."

WSWS: What are your thoughts on the fact that high

school students went back to school buildings on Monday?

Teacher: "You don't know who high schoolers are interacting with on public transit. That's going to really complicate contact tracing. And high schools are where people are getting vaccinated now. They are just pushing this through, and whoever doesn't make it, to get a vaccine in time before going in, oh well, tough."

WSWS: One of the main slogans of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is the call for a nationwide general strike led by teachers for a lockdown. It would demand fully funded online education, for all non-essential workers to receive full wages for the duration of the lockdown. The New York City committee is part of an international network of committees fighting for this. Our European sections are working for an all-Europe general strike, same as in the US, that would not only address COVID-19 but also speak to all the social issues facing the working class. What are your thoughts on this?

Teacher: "I completely support it. I realize that this is happening all over the world. A friend from Germany told me that Germany is opening just to close. I support the people in Europe. I saw that your group posted about school reopening in Latin America.

"And I support the calls for that here. It's not like we are asking to close schools out of nowhere. It's a pandemic. This is an emergency.

"They are not making an exception simply because they do not care about us. And I mean politicians when I say 'they.' These politicians put the economy over health. But I believe teachers unions and administrators are also guilty. We make up the economy. It's not a fact of life like gravity, or the fact that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. It's not a law of nature, it's something completely in our control. And to act like we can't do anything because it would affect the economy, I mean how are you going to have an economy if everyone is dead? I support everything you just said."



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