

Biden demands resumption of in-person learning in “school reopening summit”

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On Wednesday, the US Department of Education hosted a “National Safe School Reopening Summit,” bringing together figures from the Biden administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and handpicked school district superintendents, union officials, teachers and students to advance the ruling class campaign to reopen schools before the pandemic is contained.

The three-and-a-half hour event, chaired by Education Secretary Miguel Cardona, had an Orwellian and highly contradictory character, in which the various speakers distorted science and sought to sugarcoat the reckless drive to reopen schools. Everyone at the summit participated remotely, with only one occupant visible on each screen, in stark contrast to the packed classrooms into which educators and students are being sent.

The current state of the pandemic and the horrific experiences of mass death and suffering over the past year were glossed over with vague references to “trauma,” while every speaker referred to school reopenings as “safe” and “scientifically based.” The entire event was designed to suppress science and chloroform educators and the broader population into accepting the reopening of schools.

This campaign takes place under conditions in which more than 1,000 people continue to die from COVID-19 every day in the US, as the seven-day average of daily new cases climbs upwards of 58,000, as the vast majority of the population remains unvaccinated, and as more infectious and lethal variants of the virus spread uncontrolled throughout the country.

In pursuing the full reopening of schools across the US, all of these officials and institutions ignore the fact that over 3.34 million children have been infected with COVID-19 in the US. They disregard the most rigorous scientific research, which clearly proves that schools are major vectors for the spread of COVID-19 and keeping them closed is a pillar of any program to contain the pandemic and save lives.

First lady Jill Biden opened Wednesday’s summit with a pre-recorded video, stating, “Over the last year, educators have done so much to keep that connection alive. But

teaching virtually just, it just isn’t the same. In my class, students don’t chat with each other like they used to.” She added, “There are some who have questioned whether or not educators want to go back to school. Of course we do!”

This was followed by a propaganda video showing opened schools, which included footage of teachers roughly one foot away from students, as well as lines of students within three feet of each other, in clear violation of the CDC’s unscientific social distancing recommendations.

Cardona then spoke, noting proudly, “The National Center for Educational Statistics share that over 45 percent of our elementary and middle schools offer in-person learning daily, about 75 percent, or three-quarters of our schools, are offering some form of in-person learning, including hybrid. That’s a great start.” He quickly added, “We must continue that so every school, K-8, offers in-person learning five days a week.”

Highlighting the twisted way in which the Democratic Party is using identity politics to unsafely reopen schools, Cardona stated, “We know there are inequities to in-person learning. Only 28 percent of black students are going to school in-person daily, 33 percent of Latino students are doing it, and only 15 percent of our Asian students are going to school in-person daily. That’s compared to half of white students that are doing it daily throughout our country.”

To address this “inequity,” Cardona stressed, “America, that is our charge to safely reopen schools as quickly as possible. The American Rescue Plan provides \$130 billion to help get this work done. With that money, we can address these inequities that I just talked about. With that, we can safely reopen our schools, and we have to act wisely and with urgency to get it done.”

Wednesday’s summit coincided with the release of \$81 billion of the \$122 billion in funding allocated to K-12 public schools by the relief package passed two weeks ago. Funding allocations are dependent upon school districts publishing “a plan for the safe return to in-person instruction and continuity of services” within 30 days of receiving funding. With the aim of maximizing the time that parents

can be sent back to work in the summer months, roughly 20 percent of these funds must be reserved for “learning recovery,” including summer school and extended-day programs.

Cardona then introduced CDC Director Rochelle Walensky, who provided further incriminating evidence of the way in which the CDC has distorted science to suit the political agenda of the Biden administration.

Walensky gave an extraordinary explanation for last week’s revision to the CDC guidelines, stating, “In our original strategy, we recommended that physical distancing should be at least six feet between people based on available evidence at the time. And to no one’s surprise, we quickly heard that this was a challenge for many schools, given their current physical layout and the number of children in some school communities. Since the initial release, CDC scientists have been actively reviewing the latest science and conducting their own studies to expand the evidence base, including that evidence on physical distancing.”

Walensky was unable to contain her laughter when she then added, “We are grateful for them moving so quickly to produce new evidence that we could act upon. Last Friday, in light of a series of studies recently published, CDC updated its recommendation for physical distancing between students in classrooms.”

The rest of the summit involved panels with other CDC officials, as well as superintendents, union officials, teachers, students and others from Cleveland, New York City, Tulsa, and Cajon Valley, California.

Most notably, the panel on New York City involved United Federation of Teachers (UFT) President Michael Mulgrew, whom Cardona asked how he was able to facilitate reopening the largest school district in the US.

Mulgrew replied, “The biggest problems we had in the beginning were, New York City was hit so hard so quickly, that as we started to plan for reopening, we were facing the reality that more and more of our school-based staff was dying. So it was really tough for us. We knew we had to focus on the anxiety and fear that so many people were facing at that point in time. While we were doing our work in July, New York City was getting close to 30,000 people who had died, so this was a real strategic piece to realize that you had to deal with this.”

Mulgrew’s reference to the mass deaths in New York City last spring and summer, which he framed as simply a mental hurdle that had to be overcome to reopen schools, was the only explicit reference to death throughout the entire summit. He neglected to mention the role that he and New York City’s Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio played in keeping schools open one year ago as the pandemic took hold in the city, which led to the infections and deaths of

numerous educators. He also omitted the fact that over 20,000 students and staff have officially tested positive for COVID-19 since schools reopened, itself a significant undercount given the district’s totally inadequate testing program.

Another pre-recorded video was later given by American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten, in which she said, “Teachers know that kids do best in school and in-person. School is where we can best nurture, teach and connect with our students. We just want to be safe. That’s why the AFT has been working to safely reopen schools since they closed, releasing our first school reopening road map last April.”

Throughout the past year, Weingarten, the AFT, and the National Education Association (NEA) have been the principal actors in allowing schools to reopen unsafely, doing nothing to mobilize their millions of members to fight for fully-funded remote learning, workplace accommodations, or any of the demands of educators. Last month, Weingarten revealed that she spends 15 hours a day on the phone with the White House, the CDC, local union heads and local politicians, orchestrating the nationwide campaign to reopen schools.

To close the meeting, a pre-recorded video of President Biden was played, in which he injected fervent nationalism into the meeting, stating, “Any nation that out-educates us is going to out-compete us. Everything our nation will be tomorrow depends on how we deliver for our young people today.” Biden concluded with the mandate, “They need the eye-to-eye contact, they need to be with you in classrooms. It’s critically important. I think we can do this. We have to. We have no choice.”

Despite the unrelenting propaganda issued by the corporate media, both big business parties, the CDC, the teachers unions, and all the institutions of the capitalist class, there is enormous opposition among educators, parents and workers to the reckless reopening of schools and nonessential workplaces. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, which exist in multiple cities and states across the US and globally, are fighting to consciously organize this opposition. We call on all those opposed to this policy to join and help build this network of committees today.



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