

# Unions, districts force the reopening of schools in Portland and Seattle

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Teachers, staff and students are being forced back into classrooms starting next week in the sister cities of Seattle, Washington and Portland, Oregon. The final agreements between the local districts and unions came quickly after executive action taken by Washington Governor Jay Inslee and Oregon Governor Kate Brown, both Democrats.

Brown's March 5 executive order directed school districts to open for students in Grades K-5 on or before the week of March 29, while students in Grades 6-12 must return before the week of April 19. One week later, Inslee issued his emergency proclamation requiring districts to offer in-person instruction by April 5 for students in K-6 grades. Grades 7-12 would open by April 19.

"After one year of closure of our schools, the time has come for every child in the state of Washington to have access to on-site instruction," Inslee stated in his press conference at the time. The week prior, he denounced oppositional teachers for being dramatic, claiming, "If I had a nickel for every excuse I have heard for not giving our children on-site instruction, I would be a millionaire at this point."

In response to the political pressure exerted by the Democratic Party from the state level all the way up to the Biden administration, the unions worked to quickly carry out their duties and rush through negotiations to arrive at reopening deals that were nowhere complete.

The Seattle Education Association (SEA) reached a tentative agreement on March 20 with Seattle Public Schools (SPS) to restart in-person learning for Pre-K, elementary and certain special education students. The agreement aligns with dates mandated by Inslee with elementary school students returning on April 5. Students who receive intensive special education services, however, are scheduled to arrive even earlier on March 29.

SPS will be reopening via a hybrid model of learning. Under the terms of this model, most students would go to an in-person classroom setting four days per week. The district is still allowing families to choose a 100 percent online learning option. This arrangement means that educators will carry enormous workloads, juggling sets of online and in-person students, while facing the daily risk of contracting the virus even with the few safety measures included in the agreement.

As many teachers have pointed out, there is also no mention of hiring additional nurses, counselors and staff to ensure small class sizes, adequate student support and the enforcement of health and safety protocols.

On March 20, the SEA Board of Directors issued a "do pass" recommendation, encouraging members to vote in favor of the agreement. While the vote totals have not been released, comments from board members on social media indicate that 12 voted in favor,

two voted against, and a few abstained. The membership vote started on Monday and will continue until Friday. Bargaining between SEA and SPS will continue, finalizing the details of the return for Grades 6 and up. It is extremely likely the additional terms of agreement will send secondary students back on the week of April 19, given their commitment to carrying out Inslee's orders.

SEA Paraprofessional President and Board Member Marla Rasmussea claimed that her "yes" vote was "about getting those protections in for our students and staff that we have been fighting for through this whole pandemic. It's about solid processes for keeping us safer and serving our most vulnerable populations. We have staff ready to go back. We have families begging us to return, and we have language that will protect us all."

Jesse Hagopian, the longtime head of the Social Equity Educators (SEE) caucus in the SEA who played a critical role in preventing strikes of Seattle educators in 2018 and 2019, has maintained a studied silence on the school reopening plan. A former member of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO), Hagopian now works as an author and speaker with the ISO's former publishing arm Haymarket Books.

Hagopian's Twitter feed is extremely active. He has published multiple tweets each day denouncing standardized testing and its impact on minority students, in particular. He makes no mention, however, of the Seattle reopening agreement, which his union just negotiated and is trying to force passage when membership votes on it next week.

Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) and the Portland Public School board negotiated a return to school plan that will begin April 1. The plan was approved by a majority vote of the PAT membership, although specific details of the vote have not been publicly shared. Students in Pre-K and Grade 1 will return on the first of the month followed by Grades 2-5 the following week. Middle and high school students would return on April 19.

Pre-K through Grade 5 students will be on campus four days a week for two hours and 15 minutes a day. Middle and high school students will be on campus twice a week for two and half hours a day. Safety measures at the schools will be of a minimal character, with COVID-19 testing available only for symptomatic students and staff.

The district's chief human resources officer Sharon Reese acknowledged, "The plan you are voting on this evening is not perfect, but it is a meaningful and critical step forward for the district, for our educators and most importantly, students."

One Portland teacher named Anna explained, "We didn't get numbers, but the message was [that it passed] 'overwhelmingly' which seemed odd to me as I personally didn't know anyone who

voted yes.

“The impact on mothers is really bothersome to many, as many, like myself, will have one option and that is to not get paid for the remainder of the school year either using FMLA or unpaid leave,” Anna said. “There will be CDL positions for K-5 for those who can’t return in person, but from what I hear none for MS/HS positions. And being that secondary teachers can’t teach elementary (unless they have that TV endorsement too) many/some those jobs will likely go to subs.

“Those that are concerned about going back feel really upset by the terms of TA, especially the lack of remote work options/loss of pay. I’m lead rep for our building, and last week was very stressful. I was on the phone with members constantly. We had no time with the TA before some educators were expected back in buildings.”

Teachers in Portland were told they simply had no choice but to return to schools when a membership vote was conducted last week. In a series of Frequently Asked Questions for teachers issued by the union, one question asks: “What happens if PAT members do not ratify this agreement?” The answer: “The district has the right to open school campuses and require us to return. ... Absent an agreement, the District will be able to act unilaterally on most conditions of a return. A ‘no’ vote essentially allows our employer to implement what they see fit.”

In an attempt to wear down opposition among parents and teachers, the PAT is relying on references to racial and social “equity.” They claim the return to school agreement addresses the concerns of minority educators, students and communities over a safe return to school, leaving aside the fact that the poor and working class of all races face the greatest risk of catching and dying from COVID-19.

The unions are utilizing many of the same tactics employed by the United Teachers of Los Angeles, Oakland Education Association, Chicago Teachers Union and the like. “This is the best we can get,” they claim, or, “If we reject the agreement, the district will reopen schools anyway and teachers do not have enough support to take action and strike.”

These arguments aim to wear down and suppress the enormous opposition to the rush to reopen schools that exists among educators, a large number of parents and the working class in general. As one Seattle teacher said on Facebook, “I am voting no. I cannot in good conscience bow to the political pressure that will cause some of our staff and students to catch Covid, which could result in lifelong health issues and/or death. Which one of our colleagues and students are we okay with sacrificing?”

“In our regular contract (this is only an addendum to that contract),” she continued, “it states that ‘Employees shall not be required to work under conditions known to be unsafe or hazardous or to perform tasks which endanger their health, safety, or well-being.’ A pandemic that can kill people qualifies. Our union should be defending that part of our contract and not bowing to political pressure, because where and when does that pressure end?”

The rush to reopen schools is a critical component of the broader campaign to eliminate restrictions on economic activity and send all workers back into unsafe conditions, opening the door to a fourth wave of infections and deaths.

As of March 22, the entire state of Washington moved into Phase Three of its coronavirus reopening plan. This allows all indoor spaces to reopen with a maximum of either 400 people, or 50 percent of capacity. It also allows for partial attendance at all outdoor sporting events, and singing can now resume at indoor religious services.

Oregon has adjusted its coronavirus risk levels, with 28 of the state’s 36 counties now considered to be at “moderate” to “low risk,” with six in the “high risk” category and only two in the “extreme” category. The “moderate” risk level classification allows for 50 percent capacity in indoor venues or 100 people, whichever is smaller, with Brown dutifully following these provisions to reopen restaurants, gyms, salons and other businesses.

Further, Governor Brown recently announced that the 100-person limit would not apply to school campuses. Both Oregon and Washington states are now following the new spacing guidelines recently issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), requiring three feet of distance in classrooms rather than the previous six feet of distance.

These policies will have deadly consequences. “The risk is not gone, the virus is still with us,” explained county public health officer Dr. Jeff Duchin. “The vast majority of the population remains susceptible to COVID-19. The viruses that are currently circulating are more effective at spreading from person to person.”

He continued, “It would be a shame if many people became infected over the next month or two just as vaccines are about to become available widely to most of the population.”

There is an alternative to this reckless campaign to reopen schools and the broader economy. Educators are in a position to mobilize a broad struggle of teachers, school staff, parents, students and other sections of the working class to demand the return to online schooling until the coronavirus pandemic is truly contained. This fight is finding expression through the development Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees across the United States and internationally, including in Oregon, which advance the life-and-death demands of educators completely independent from the Democrats, Republicans and the unions.

The West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is meeting this Saturday, March 27, at 2:00 pm PDT, and we encourage all who agree with this perspective to register today to attend.



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