

As pandemic surges, New York City mayor makes it harder to close schools with COVID-19 outbreaks

Evan Blake
9 April 2021

Even though the US has now entered its fourth surge of the COVID-19 pandemic, driven primarily by the uncontrolled spread of more infectious and lethal variants in schools, the drive to reopen schools and keep them open continues apace.

On Thursday, New York City's Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio unilaterally changed Department of Education (DOE) rules, making it more difficult to temporarily close schools when there are COVID-19 outbreaks.

Until now, schools had to close for 10 days whenever two cases were detected in the same building within a seven-day period, but starting Monday the threshold will be raised to four cases. Further, the four infections must be determined to have originated inside the school, which is all but impossible given the totally inadequate contact tracing in the city. Significantly, whole schools will no longer close for 24 hours when outbreaks occur, with only individual classrooms closing temporarily.

These changes were made one day before the latest deadline for families to opt-in for in-person learning and are part of a transparent effort to pack the schools as much as possible and keep them open regardless of the spread of the virus. The latest opt-in period was itself announced on March 24, just after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) unscientifically reduced distancing recommendations between students from six feet to three feet.

To date, the vast majority of New York City families have chosen to keep their children learning safely from home, with roughly 700,000 out of the district's 1.1 million students learning remotely. Since schools first reopened last September, 10,717 students and 10,618 staff have officially tested positive, with only 20 percent of the district's students and staff tested weekly. Only 44 percent of DOE employees have been vaccinated, with 82,000 employees totally unprotected from the deadly virus.

In-person learning has been chaotic, with 13,612 classroom closures and 2,373 extended building closures since last September, as schools often announce closures hours before the school day is to begin. The easing of school closure rules is being combined with a propaganda campaign falsely claiming that schools are safe, in order to entice families to send their

children back.

As with de Blasio's unilateral decision last November to bypass the city's rules in order to reopen elementary schools, Thursday's move was immediately endorsed by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in the face of enormous opposition among educators.

The UFT tweeted a statement which read in part: "Our independent medical experts have advised us to shift our attention from unlinked cases within schools to the cases within schools that can be traced to a common source. Our focus should shift to even greater monitoring inside the schools to avoid spread." Echoing the line of de Blasio, the Biden administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the UFT wrote: "We understand that as circumstances and science evolve, policies should shift to keep up." American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten retweeted the statement.

The UFT censored multiple comments on their tweet, undoubtedly those most critical of the union. One comment still under the post correctly notes: "This new rule is not based in science or valid data. It is based on an agenda. Schools with huge #s of cases will stay open because the origin of cases can't be determined (community spread is too high). This is a convoluted way of agreeing to eliminating all closure protocols."

The loosening of restrictions in New York City is part of a nationwide push to fully reopen schools and businesses long before the pandemic is contained. On Monday, the CDC modified its guidelines on disinfecting surfaces, citing studies that show the coronavirus is not primarily spread through fomite transmission but rather through respiratory droplets.

The impetus for this change in guidelines appears to be mostly financial, to reduce expenses on disinfectant supplies and has nothing to do with protecting people. There are so many unknowns with COVID-19, in particular, the new variants that are emerging and a whole host of other viruses that are readily spread through fomites.

For the past two months, there has been an unrelenting torrent of lies and distortions of science directed by the Biden

administration and parroted by the CDC, the corporate media, and the teachers unions in order to justify reopening schools en masse.

On February 12, the CDC modified its school reopening guidelines to encourage districts to reopen “at any level of community transmission,” only noting “ventilation” twice and encouraging districts to open windows instead of renovate their air filtration systems.

Four days later, Biden himself lied directly to a second grader at a nationally televised CNN town hall, telling her, “You’re not likely to be able to be exposed to something and spread it to mommy or daddy.” He added, “Kids don’t get ... COVID very often. It’s unusual for that to happen... You’re in the safest group of people in the whole world.”

On March 19, the CDC further updated its guidelines to recommend only three-foot distancing between students, in order to pack as many as possible into classrooms, with CDC Director Rochelle Walensky stating that “science evolved” for this purpose. The following week, Education Secretary Miguel Cardona hosted an hours-long propaganda event to push school reopenings and has since launched a nationwide tour for this campaign. Speaking on Tuesday in Philadelphia, which began reopening schools last month, Cardona said, “That’s the message we want to get across the country, that we can safely reopen schools if we follow certain steps and we can do it quickly.”

The results of these criminal distortions of science, which the *World Socialist Web Site* comprehensively exposed and warned against, are now on full display. Throughout the Upper Midwest and Northeast regions, massive outbreaks in K-12 schools that largely reopened in February and March are now fueling the fourth surge of the pandemic.

Since February 22, there have been 357 recorded outbreaks in K-12 schools in Michigan, with a 20 percent increase in just the last week. Schools are now the number one source of new outbreaks in the state, where daily new cases have increased by more than 700 percent in the past two months and hospitals are now at 92 percent capacity.

Last week, Minnesota reported 749 COVID-19 infections in schools. In Massachusetts, there were 801 new cases reported among students and 244 among school staff last week. In Iowa City (population 75,000), 564 students and 22 staff were quarantined this week as 99 students and four staff tested positive for the virus.

On Tuesday, schools in Pittsburgh reopened for in-person classes, starting with the primary grade students and expanding to the secondary students in the coming weeks. As a result, every school district in Pennsylvania now has some level of in-person education. COVID-19 cases have been rising for the past four weeks in Pittsburgh and throughout the state, as the state’s daily new case count has climbed back to the peak reached in January.

At least 218 active and retired educators have died from

COVID-19 in 2021, according to *Education Week*. One of the most recent deaths took place in Covington County, Alabama, where 61-year-old Sheila Smith passed away on March 26 after contracting the virus while teaching in-person. Despite this tragedy and numerous other teachers’ deaths, the state is proceeding to end its mask mandate this Friday and is reducing its quarantining rules.

In the coming weeks, a number of major school districts are pressing ahead with reopening plans, either beginning with elementary and middle schools or adding high schools. In each instance, the teachers unions have been full accomplices in the reopening process.

On Monday, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second largest in the US, is set to begin reopening elementary schools. Initial surveys indicate that roughly 200,000 of the district’s 665,000 students are expected to return for in-person learning. On April 19, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is set to begin reopening high schools, despite elementary schools already becoming hotbeds of infection throughout the city. Schools are also set to reopen in the coming weeks in Portland, Seattle, and other districts, while a growing number aim to fully reopen high schools.

The UFT’s role in New York City has been mirrored in every district, with the teachers unions playing the most critical role in subordinating their members’ health and safety to the demands of the ruling elites that schools reopen in order to send parents back to work producing corporate profits.

The ruthless drive to reopen schools is broadly opposed by educators, parents and students across the US, who are organizing rank-and-file committees independently of the unions to carry out a fight against these policies. A Tennessee teacher and member of the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I support the immediate shutdown of all in-person instruction and nonessential businesses until the pandemic is contained and communities are vaccinated. It doesn’t take much more than having paid attention in a high school biology class to know that COVID will continue to spread as long as humans continue to gather together.”

She added, “To choose not to shut down is choosing that more illness and death is acceptable as long as corporate profits continue to fill the pockets of the elites. At the end of the day, this is the cynical choice Biden and Randi Weingarten are making for school personnel, students, families and communities all over this country: They choose profits over our lives.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact