

As districts press to fully reopen, American Federation of Teachers endorses three-foot distancing in schools

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On Monday, *US News & World Report* published an article titled, “Teachers Union Switches Stance, Now Endorses CDC Guidance on School Reopenings.” The article describes American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten’s collusion with the Biden administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in reducing spacing recommendations for schools.

On March 19, the CDC unscientifically changed its guidelines saying that children in schools only need three feet of spacing between them instead of six feet. Just before the change, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky cynically told a House committee hearing, “As soon as our guidance came out [in mid-February], it became very clear that six feet was among the things that was keeping schools closed, and in that context science evolves.”

The studies cited by Walensky and the CDC were limited and in no way justified the policy change, with the most rigorous studies proving that fully remote learning is essential to contain the pandemic. The CDC’s distortion of science capped off two months of the new Biden administration’s full-court press to reopen all schools across the US, in which Weingarten and the AFT played the most pivotal role.

On February 12, the CDC modified its school reopening guidelines for the first time under Biden, encouraging districts to reopen “at any level of community transmission.” Despite the fact that the guidelines only noted “ventilation” twice and encouraged districts to open windows instead of renovate their air filtration systems, Weingarten gave her full endorsement. Two days before these guidelines were released, she revealed to the *New York Times* that she was spending upwards of 15 hours each day on the phone with the CDC, the White House, local mayors and local union heads, orchestrating the Biden administration’s national school reopening drive.

The further blatant distortion of science by the CDC on

March 19, when they arbitrarily reduced spacing recommendations to three feet, provoked a flood of opposition from educators on social media. Knowing she would lose all credibility among teachers, for nearly a month Weingarten postured as being opposed to this loosening of spacing guidelines in schools. Monday’s article makes clear that her feigned opposition was fraudulent and largely meant to recover her tarnished image.

The *US News & World Report* article says that Weingarten “wrote to local leaders” last week to inform them about the reversal of her position, which she did “after the CDC provided answers to a series of questions she posed about the revised guidance.” Without detailing either her questions or the CDC’s answers, Weingarten wrote, “There remain some within-school tough logistical issues to work out, and some real concerns around ventilation, but today’s letter made a compelling case.”

The article notes that the CDC’s letter was “sent to Weingarten last week and signed by Walensky and Education Secretary Miguel Cardona.” Neither the letter from Walensky and Cardona to Weingarten, nor the letter from Weingarten to “local leaders” has been posted publicly, underscoring the backroom maneuvering involved in this sordid affair.

The article notes that in her letter to unspecified “local leaders,” Weingarten apparently wrote, “Personally, their response has eased my concerns with the physical distancing guidance change.” Parrotting the language of Walensky and the CDC, she added, “The letter makes clear the new physical distancing guidance is a floor, not a ceiling, and how the CDC recommendations are implemented will vary dependent on the local context in addition to the evolving science.”

The article gives no details on what scientific evidence led Weingarten to change her position, but rather makes clear that it was a result of political pressure brought to bear by the Biden administration, stating, “The about face comes as

President Joe Biden and Cardona have increasingly pushed school districts to reopen for in-person learning, including urban school districts.”

The article quotes Cardona as stating last week, “I think we need to put our foot on the gas pedal... Our students can’t wait until the fall. If we can safely reopen now, we should be doing it. Our students deserve it.”

Monday’s article was published on the same day that elementary schools began reopening in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second-largest district with roughly 665,000 students. Next Monday, Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the third-largest district with roughly 400,000 students, is set to reopen high schools, while a host of other districts are pressing ahead to fully reopen schools.

Weingarten’s reversal takes place under conditions in which the mass reopening of schools has precipitated a major new surge of the pandemic across the US and globally, driven by the spread of more infectious SARS-CoV-2 variants, which unvaccinated children more readily transmit to their parents and other family members. In Michigan, the epicenter in the US, the surge is definitively tied to the reopening of schools. In numerous other states, schools are the now the leading source of COVID-19 outbreaks.

As of April 5, roughly 55.3 percent of K-12 students are now attending school fully in-person, while only 14.4 percent of all K-12 students are learning safely from home, according to Berbio.com. Under Biden, roughly 40.3 percent of all K-12 students have switched from remote learning to either fully in-person or the equally unsafe “hybrid” model, which alternates between in-person and remote learning.

In order to contain the pandemic and halt the deepening global surge, it is necessary to close all schools and nonessential workplaces internationally, while providing full economic security to all affected workers and small businesses as the population is safely vaccinated. Instead, in the US, both big business parties, with the support of the teachers unions, are pushing to pack the schools in order to compel as many parents as possible to return to work producing profits.

Weingarten’s about-face is a transparent effort to facilitate this process. This development once again makes absolutely clear that the AFT, the National Education Association (NEA), and all their state and local affiliates are corporatist entities that fully support the prerogatives of the ruling class. Weingarten herself sits on the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and rakes in an executive salary of roughly \$500,000 each year, while hundreds of bureaucrats in the local, state and national teachers unions garner over \$100,000 annually. None of the “local leaders” to whom Weingarten wrote her letter have come forward to denounce

her about-face or protest the horrific conditions that educators, parents and students confront.

In direct opposition to the union bureaucracies, among rank-and-file educators there is a growing militancy and determination to close schools in order to save lives. Michael Hull, a member of the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, questioned Weingarten at a March 16 online event hosted by the Facebook group Badass Teachers Association, raising the limitations of the CDC guidelines, in particular under the spread of more dangerous COVID-19 variants.

On Wednesday, Hull wrote a statement denouncing Weingarten’s endorsement of the CDC’s three-foot spacing recommendation, noting that at the March 16 event, “I gave Weingarten evidence that schools are not safe, particularly in places like Texas where mask mandates have been lifted. I told her about the deaths, disabilities and financial hardships educators, parents and students have endured. I gave her the benefit of the doubt and asked her to pivot away from the disastrous ‘safe reopening’ strategy. I gave her and AFT the chance to fight for us. What I have discovered is that the trade unions are not colluding with the establishment; they are the establishment.”

While Weingarten told Hull that the teachers unions might call for school closures in the event that the new variants spread further, she is doing the exact opposite. The critical task facing educators, parents and students is to expand the network of rank-and-file safety committees that now exist in districts across the US, and unite with similar networks among autoworkers, Amazon workers and more, to prepare for national and international strike action to close schools and nonessential workplaces in order to contain the pandemic and save lives.



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