

Los Angeles Times promotes right-wing parents' group that advocates lifting of mask mandates for students

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On Wednesday, the *Los Angeles Times* featured an article titled, “Parents frustrated by pandemic education launch activist group to raise their voices.” The article sympathetically portrays the fringe right-wing parents’ group “OpenSchoolsCA,” which has established a non-profit to lobby for an even more aggressive opening of schools this fall, including the abandonment of all safety measures such as masks, quarantines of classrooms where COVID-19 outbreaks occur, and more. While not stated explicitly, the *Times* article makes clear that the group will also promote charter schools, school choice and other efforts to privatize public education.

The *Times* writes that the group “coalesced around parent anger over how long it was taking to reopen California campuses that were closed for a year or more amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Their discontent simmered for months when reopenings offered students much less than a full five-day-a-week school experience.”

A similar right-wing group, Reopen California Schools, recently launched a campaign to sue the California Department of Public Health for mandating these safety measures, which they describe as “barbaric.”

The *Times* article is only the latest example of the bourgeois media uncritically presenting such right wing fringe groups as the voice of the majority of parents, when in reality the vast majority continue to keep their children learning safely at home. According to data from Chicago Public Schools, only 22 percent of students attended in-person classes the week of April 19. In New York City, 61 percent of students are still attending remotely. In Los Angeles—as the *LA Times* article itself is obligated to note—the parents of roughly 70 percent of children are keeping their kids at home.

While the founding member of OpenSchoolsCA, Oakland parent Megan Bacigalupi, insists that her organization does not back charter schools, at least two of its advisers are prominent right-wing advocates for charter schools: David Castillo, a charter school consultant and advocate, and former Oakland Unified School District board member Jumoke Hinton Hodge, a virulent promoter of charter schools.

During the pandemic, the American ruling class has doubled

down on its efforts to expand charter schools by diverting funds from public schools. An analysis by Good Jobs First, which tracks stimulus spending at Covid Stimulus Watch, shows that private and charter schools received roughly six times more funding per school than public schools from the CARES Act: \$855,000 per facility on average, compared to \$134,500 for public schools. The Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) under the CARES Act, which was not open for public entities, allocated \$5.7 billion in PPP loans to charter and private schools.

Following the worst year in living memory for educators and the entire working class, when masses have been forced to return to deadly working conditions, the efforts to defund public education will provoke further opposition within the working class. To counteract the growing class consciousness among workers, the ruling class utilizes its bought-and-paid-for media to uncritically air the views of a frustrated group of middle-class parents. A close examination of the backgrounds of these individuals makes clear the class forces for whom they speak.

Megan Bacigalupi’s public LinkedIn page highlights a career with police agencies in New York, before she relocated to California. Serving first as a lawyer in the Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator under former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, she went on to become the Deputy Commissioner for Intergovernmental Affairs at the New York City Business Integrity Commission. Megan and her husband John Mellott Bacigalupi, who is currently a senior vice president at Cantor Capital, are a “power couple” intent on jockeying for privileges within the upper-middle class.

Jumoke Hinton Hodge has a long record of being a shill for charter school corporations. In 2012, she was endorsed by Go Public Schools, an organization backed by advocates for charter schools like the Walton Family Foundation. Go Public Schools provided Hodge with almost \$63,000 in the 2012 Oakland School Board race, and then almost \$105,000 in 2016.

In 2012, Hodge voted to close five elementary schools in Oakland, resulting in the displacement of an estimated 900 elementary students. The vote led to a three-week occupation of

Lakeview Elementary, forcing the superintendent to resign. In 2019, ignoring the pleas of students, teachers, and community members, Hodge voted along with the majority of the school board to close Roots International Academy, forcing students to relocate to a school over a mile away. Shortly thereafter, during the 2019 Oakland teachers strike, Hodge viciously attacked and choked a kindergarten teacher, Danisha Right, a brutal assault for which she received no punishment.

OpenSchoolsCA also has the support of a few medical professionals that have distorted science for political purposes during the pandemic. Replying to their own tweet on the formation of the non-profit, the organization expressed their solidarity with three scientists that the organization considered to be “public health guiding lights.” All three scientists—Vinay Prasad, Monica Gandhi and Tracy Beth Høeg—have been promoted by the ruling class in their reckless drive to reopen schools.

Gandhi is a Professor of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. On May 27, she spoke on Democracy Now, adding weight to the scientifically discredited claim by the US intelligence agencies that SARS-CoV-2 may have been leaked from the Wuhan Virology Institute in China. She then supported the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance to lift restrictions on vaccinated populations. Throughout the spring, Gandhi has also been brought on the broadcast media to push for school reopenings, recently going so far as to advocate the complete lifting of mask usage among all children in schools, long before most are vaccinated.

Tracy Beth Høeg is a physician at Northern California Orthopaedic Associates who promotes the scientifically disproven claim that the infection in schools is merely a reflection of infection in the community. Similar to statements made by Gandhi and advocated by OpenSchoolsCA, Høeg recently opined in the *Washington Post* that “children should return to their normal lives this summer and in the upcoming school year, without masks and regardless of their vaccination status.”

A recent tweet by Høeg states: “The message that schools are overall safer than the community for kids both in terms of COVID and overall health and safety needs to get out and can’t be emphasized enough.” On Twitter, she argues against providing adequate ventilation in classrooms, and claims that it is “very safe” for teachers to work in poorly ventilated rooms with unmasked students.

Vinay Prasad is a hematologist-oncologist and Associate Professor in the Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics at the University of California, San Francisco. Prasad frequently argues that schools must stay open and that it is up to the individual to take appropriate action to not be exposed to the virus. He completely ignores the fact that schools have been major centers of outbreaks across the US, and that students have acted as transmitters of the virus, leading to an unknown

number developing “Long COVID,” while thousands are being treated for multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C). Prasad recently stated, “Unless the local healthcare system is approaching overload or collapse, schools should remain open.”

American Institute for Economic Research (AIER) features an interview between Prasad and Martin Kulldorff, professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School. Kulldorf was one of the authors of the Great Barrington Declaration (GBD) that argued for a policy of natural herd immunity, which became the de facto policy of the Trump administration and continued under Biden, as the vaccines have been gradually distributed.

The AIER, a libertarian think tank which posits as their aim “a society based on property rights and open markets,” is engaged in a highly reactionary, anti-working class and anti-socialist enterprise. The GBD had the backing of right-wing billionaire Charles Koch, who hosted a private soiree of scientists, economists and journalists to provide the homicidal declaration a modicum of respectability and formulate herd immunity as a necessary global policy in response to the pandemic.

The elevation of figures like those involved in OpenSchoolsCA has a definite political aim. The American ruling class, having done essentially nothing to curb the pandemic through public health measures, stands exposed in the eyes of broad masses, while the pandemic itself is far from over.

In order to undermine mounting opposition among workers, the ruling class relies on a fringe minority in the medical and scientific community, the capitalist media and a privileged layer within the upper-middle class that itself is utilizing the crisis to advance its own material position within the top 10 percent of American society. The ruling class fears above all a social explosion from below, as the simmering anger of broad masses threatens to erupt to the surface.



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