

# New York state permits children and adults to be unmasked in K-12 schools

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On Friday, New York State Health Commissioner Howard Zucker informed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that masks would no longer be required for K-12 educators, students, or youth at summer camps in the state. This move by the Democratic Cuomo administration follows the recent dropping of other COVID-19 safety standards across the state.

Zucker's letter told CDC Director Rochelle Walensky that it would go forward with these measures unless the CDC objected. He wrote, "If there is any data or science that you are aware of that contradicts moving forward with this approach, please let me know as soon as possible."

As of Sunday, no official guidance has been sent to school districts, causing confusion statewide about whether the mask mandate has been dropped for this Monday. One superintendent of a school district in the Hudson Valley said that his email was "blowing up" with questions about the dropping of the masking mandate.

The Cuomo administration, of course, knows full well that the CDC will supply no evidence that contradicts this reckless action. Last week, Cuomo remarked that the CDC's advice that children wear masks outdoors "seems a little extreme."

The CDC, acting in concert with the Biden Administration, has in fact led the effort in the US to systematically dismantle mitigation measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, under conditions in which the majority of Americans, including children, remain unvaccinated. On May 13, the CDC dropped the requirement that unvaccinated people wear masks in public venues, absurdly relying on an honor system, and stopped tracking COVID-19 infections among those who have been inoculated.

Cuomo has fully embraced the CDC's lifting of mask requirements for unvaccinated people. He recently stated at a press conference, "If you are vaccinated, you are

safe," adding, "No masks. No social distancing."

Both Cuomo and New York City's Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio have been engaged in an intensive campaign to fully reopen schools and non-essential workplaces for the past month, regardless of the vaccination rate. Both politicians have sought to relax all standards on social distancing.

On May 19, Cuomo removed the outdoor residential gathering limit altogether and allowed indoor residential gatherings of up to 50 people. Large-scale indoor venue capacity was increased to 30 percent and large-scale outdoor venue capacity to 33 percent. On the same day, capacity restrictions for businesses were lifted as long as patrons could maintain the required social distance of six feet. This mandate has the status of a suggestion only and is seldom enforced.

In supermarkets throughout the state, there is not even a pretense of requiring a six-foot separation between people. Markers on aisles have been removed and social distancing announcements over PA systems have largely ceased. While many smaller businesses do still enforce social distancing, in most cases individuals are left to themselves to wear masks and stand apart.

Most notoriously, de Blasio announced on May 24 that he would open the city's schools to fully in-person learning in September, with no remote option, despite the fact the vast majority of parents have chosen to keep their kids learning safely from home. De Blasio said at a press conference, "One million kids will be back in their classroom in September, all in person, no remote."

Even before vaccines became widely available, state and city Democratic administrations in New York sought to decrease social distancing by opening schools and ending a brief (and barely enforced) lockdown on construction work last fall. Statewide, young children were encouraged to return to face-to-face learning and their educators were required to do so.

Even by the state's own standards, a "low" COVID-19 infection rate means that, according to the latest statistics, in the last day 816 people were hospitalized with the disease, 549 have tested positive and there have been 13 fatalities. Since February 2020, New York state has suffered 52,852 deaths from COVID-19, 33,280 of those in New York City alone, with both figures known to be underestimates.

The decision to permit de-masking in schools has angered educators throughout the state. One science teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Just moments ago, I found out that my district is supporting the new mask rule. I do not know how this is going to play out, but I know that I am not comfortable going to work now. I am sure that I'm not alone in that feeling."

It is not clear how many local school districts will choose to drop the mask requirement. Laura Curran, the Executive of Nassau County, one of the most populous suburban counties outside of New York City, said, "I've been pushing for this change, and I am excited that our protocols are moving to match the tremendous progress we have made."

New York State Union of Teachers (NYSUT) President Andy Pallotta feigned surprise at the announcement, but acquiesced to the state's decision, simply suggesting that school districts assess "local conditions and connect with their educators and parents to decide the best course of action for protecting their school community."

NYSUT, an affiliate of the American Teachers Federation (AFT), is following the lead of AFT President Randi Weingarten, who demanded the full reopening of all US schools for daily in-person learning by this fall in a speech given hours before the May 13 CDC announcement on lifting mask mandates for vaccinated people.

Michael Mulgrew, the president of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City, made no comment on the announcement, although the city's Department of Education announced that it will still require masks for students and educators inside of school buildings. Mulgrew, however, has enthusiastically endorsed de Blasio's decision to return to fully in-person instruction in September.

Opposition to the dropping of the mask mandate in school has been muted, not because it does not exist, but because the entire Democratic Party and trade union apparatus statewide have fully backed the reckless moves to open the economy to ensure the steady flow of profits. The dutiful corporate media reports almost exclusively on

those who are in favor of dropping non-pharmaceutical COVID-19 mitigation efforts, including right-wing pro-reopening parents groups.

Social media is one of the few outlets available to educators to make their opinions known. One upstate New York teacher related on Facebook that she had run into students who "are afraid to go to school tomorrow." Another said, "I am high risk and... am in four different classrooms and in the extremely crowded hallways between classes. I don't have any days left to go out on leave again. I am sure I am not alone."

Not only is opposition widespread on social media, it also has a political and organizational expression. The only organization in New York that has systematically opposed the reduction of COVID-19 safety measures—and the political parties and trade unions that have implemented it—has been the New York Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which has sought to politically prepare educators to organize industrial action to shut schools until the majority of the population has been vaccinated.

On May 26, this committee met and issued a statement against the opening of New York City schools in September. This followed statements by sister committees that have been formed across the US and internationally to unite educators, parents, students and all workers across district, state and national boundaries in a common struggle.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee network believes that not only the pandemic, but all vital issues that face working people, can only be addressed on a global scale. It is for that reason that it supports the foundation on May 1 of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

All New York educators who want to stop the community spread of COVID-19—which is being actively promoted by the Democrats, the Republicans and unions—and to fight in defense of public education more broadly, should sign up today to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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