

“I question both his motivation and the science behind his decision”

New York educators oppose Governor Cuomo’s efforts to lift mask mandates in K-12 schools

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Last week, the administration of New York’s Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo dropped a mask mandate for educators and children in schools and summer camps at a time when less than half of the population is fully vaccinated. In a letter to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the state health department asked if the federal authority had any objection to the dropping of the requirement. As of this writing, the CDC has not responded to the state’s letter.

Educators in New York state reacted with dismay to the ruling, the latest in the near-total relaxation of COVID-19 safety measures. The new guidance caused such opposition and confusion that by Sunday night the New York State Education Department (NYSED) was forced to issue a semi-retraction and keep the mask mandate for children inside of school buildings. The mask mandate continues to be lifted for children outdoors.

In an official letter, NYSED told districts that “schools should continue to operate under their existing procedures until further notice. No changes have been, or will be, made by the Executive until after Monday June 7 to afford the CDC an opportunity to respond to the letter.” It is unclear if the mask requirement will be reinstated in those districts that dropped it on Monday.

The widespread opposition by educators, students and parents to the dropping of the mask mandate indoors was unquestionably a significant factor in the decision of the Cuomo administration to walk it back.

Before Cuomo was forced to delay his attempt to relax this elementary public health measure, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to two New York state educators, Carol, an English Language Arts teacher, and Ellen, a science teacher, about their thoughts on the measure and on the most recent stage of the pandemic. Their names have been changed out of concern for retribution by their districts and unions.

We began by asking Carol and Ellen what they thought would be the results of the governor’s decision to allow students to unmask in class.

Carol said, “It strikes me as both a premature and unwise decision on Cuomo’s part. I question both his motivation and the science behind his decision. One concern I have is that even though school districts have the freedom to keep mask rules in place, there will be a lot of pressure from those in the community who were COVID-denying or anti-mask in the first place.”

Ellen commented, “I think the answer to this one depends on the response of individual school districts. I know for a fact that this decision has caused a lot of new anxiety and frustration in school employees. Most of us have already been pushed to our limits, and we are barely hanging on for these last few weeks.

“I personally do not feel comfortable going to work if no one is wearing a mask. I don’t know how to remedy that situation, or what power I have to refuse to go, but that is my inclination. I don’t understand why they couldn’t wait until school was over to make this determination.

“My hope is that enough people will push back on this decision that it will force them to delay implementing it, or that the CDC will take a stand and block it. If neither of those things happen, I honestly believe that people who are already on the fence about leaving the profession will absolutely make the decision to do so.”

This reporter noted that less than 50 percent of the population is fully vaccinated in the US, and most children are not vaccinated at all, asking Carol and Ellen how Cuomo’s decision, coming on top of the relaxation of other safety measures, such as opening sports arenas and allowing other large gatherings, will affect public health.

Carol replied, “Not only can one still get the virus, but it could be spread to those who do not have access to the

vaccine. And why is Cuomo doing this when recent variants are hitting kids harder than the virus initially was? I read recently that one in three kids hospitalized with COVID end up in ICU.

“Kids under 12 cannot access the vaccine. On top of that, we have some data but do not know for sure how long vaccine immunity lasts, not to mention that the amount of time is not just vaccine dependent but based on demographics.

“My expectation is that the protection conveyed may last longer in a younger person. Is it three months? Six? Nine? Longer? We just do not know. Do we have booster vaccines ready and available? What about the rising number of variants? To me, there are so many variables that this decision is just unwise. I am very concerned that when you combine this with allowing large gatherings, it’s almost a perfect storm that will allow the virus to continue to mutate and spread.”

Ellen stated, “I hope I am wrong, but I believe that we are going to start seeing spikes in infection rates again. As a teacher, this is very frustrating for me. I certainly want to be able to enjoy my summer just like everyone else, but I absolutely cannot deal with another school year like this one. We are opening up all areas of society simultaneously and completely removing safety measures. As far as I’m concerned, it is a recipe for disaster.”

We next asked what both educators thought of the spread of the virus in India.

Carol commented, “It’s heartbreaking. We cannot respond to a pandemic as isolationists and leave other nations to fend for themselves, nor can we expend all our resources and leave those living in our nation vulnerable. A more coordinated global response could be helpful, but how does that even work when faced with the science-denying covidioy of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro? By its very nature, any pandemic is a global problem.”

Ellen said, “We should use the experiences of other places in the world as warnings, or at least for guidance, but that does not tend to be the case. It is concerning that we seem to be ignoring the fact that this virus is raging in other areas of the world and pretending like it can’t or won’t happen here. It has been proven that it can and possibly will again.”

When asked what she thought of the rise of variants of the virus in New York, Carol replied, “It is of great concern. The way I see it, vaccination is an important measure of protection we did not have when the pandemic began, but it’s not some sort of magic that vanquishes the pandemic. I’m very concerned about inequity in who has had access to the vaccines from one region of New York to another, from state to state, from nation to nation.”

Ellen added, “The multiple variants of this virus are

definitely a cause for concern. However, I have noticed that they are covering it less in the news lately. I am curious if the current vaccines will continue to cover the variants or if they will have to continue making new vaccines to try to keep up with the changes. It seems that the virus is changing much more rapidly than we are able to adapt to.”

Speaking on the motivations behind the Cuomo and Biden administrations’ relaxing of safety standards, Ellen stated, “I would imagine that the motivation of both the state and federal governments is to continue padding the economy and improving their favor with constituents. The decisions are certainly not based on science.”

Carol commented, “As for Governor Cuomo’s motivation—and this may well be true for President Biden—I cannot help but be concerned that they may be motivated by the public’s weariness with the pandemic and desire for it to all be over. I also think there’s been an ongoing battle over fear of the economy suffering vs. fear of the pandemic. So, could there be economic motivation? It’s more than possible.

“The pandemic has taught us a lot, if we are willing to listen and learn. A basic income, even if modest, and universal, single-payer health care are needed now more than ever.

“Something is wrong when one presidential administration realized we were not ready to handle a pandemic and the next administration followed such a shocking rejection of science and data that we didn’t just contain the virus early on. We actually were subject to such corrupt leadership that hundreds of thousands died who did not have to die.

“And why did the virus travel so quickly early on? Underpaid nursing home staff, with little time off or sick days, often had to piecemeal part-time work at multiple nursing homes or hospitals. Maybe if we did not abuse workers and paid a truly living/sustainable wage, maybe this would not have been so bad. Could the virus have been completely contained? Probably not, but we did not have to lose an estimated 600,000 people. I’m not sure how many realize how huge and awful this is.”



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