Educators angered over scrapping of COVID-19 mitigation measures in schools

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12 July 2021

Last Friday, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released new guidelines on reopening K-12 schools, encouraging the reckless repudiation of all safety measures. A note in the "Summary of Recent Changes" section of the guidelines stated that the CDC "Added language on the importance of offering in-person learning, regardless of whether all of the prevention strategies can be implemented at the school." The first bullet point in the "Key Takeaways" section reads, "Students benefit from in-person learning, and safely returning to in-person instruction in the fall 2021 is a priority."

The corporate media has wholeheartedly supported the CDC's revisions, with the *New York Times* noting in an article, "The country's two major teachers' unions, which have close relationships with the Biden administration, praised the guidance. Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, whose members in some cases fought the reopening of schools this past school year, said the recommendations are 'grounded in both science and common sense.'"

The CDC's repudiation of safety measures takes place while summer school is still in session, with a majority of districts having opened their doors to as many students as possible. In most districts, large numbers of teachers have opted out of teaching this summer, meaning that understaffed classrooms will be packed with students.

In New York City, the largest school district in the US with roughly 1.1 million students, 200,000 have enrolled in summer school. Los Angeles United School District, the second largest with 660,000 students, has roughly 100,000 students enrolled in summer school. Numerous other districts have 5-10 times their normal summer school enrollment, while major outbreaks have already happened in summer school programs.

The school reopening campaign orchestrated by the CDC, Democratic and Republican politicians, the teachers unions and the corporate media has been met with outrage among educators who oppose this reckless endangerment of millions of children, educators, parents and the broader population. They recognize the enormous dangers posed, as this takes place under conditions in which the highly infectious and lethal Delta variant is already the dominant strain in the US and is causing a major surge in infections.

A San Diego teacher who wished to remain anonymous told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "The pandemic taught me that to students, I can be a lifeline and mentor, even through a screen. It also taught me that for my school district, I can be a tool and easily replaceable, should I get sick. Lifting the mask requirement puts us and our families at risk. It ignores science and data from around the world. And, it will ultimately cost our communities more than the price of extending online learning. Many of my colleagues feel the same way but are scared to speak up."

She added, "The union is actively dismissing and alienating those of us with reasonable objections or questions. Admin is pressuring us to ignore warnings and extend ourselves to 'make up for lost time.' It's the beginning of a dark time for education."

A Connecticut teacher stated, "Try explaining to an elderly mother why she is standing at the foot of her son's bed who is dying due to COVID because he was unable to be vaccinated and the complications from diabetes have now created a terminal illness. Explain to her why her son is dying before her.

"Teachers have known for years that students are more than just a number. The hyper-focus on testing and assessment and quantitative research has led us to now quantify human life and decide who is more important and who gets to have their mommy at kindergarten graduation or who gets to grow old and die before their children. People are worth more than numbers. If every life is precious, why are we doing this? Where are the pro-life protesters? Where are the people fighting for the most vulnerable and at-risk? The two political parties in this country are defunct and they've lost their way"

A retired New York educator commented, "I am very much against this decision. Right now, my son's fully vaccinated friend who is visiting from Boston is in an Airbnb in Brooklyn suffering with COVID. I am very much against the no-mask, no-social distancing policy. It's a recipe for disaster, especially in overcrowded schools."

A Michigan teacher told the WSWS, "I am very upset about the CDC removing mask requirements in schools. I'm a high school teacher and during the pandemic several of my students were very sick due to COVID. One of my students lost her

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father due to COVID and the entire family had COVID as well. My niece is nine years old, she had COVID, and about a month later the entire class had to sit out because one of their classmates contracted COVID.

"This is absolutely going to be a crisis. Middle and high school teachers see 150 or more students a day and we can't remember who has the vaccine or not while we are trying to teach. Please keep the mask mandates in schools. Several teachers that are at the retirement age are ready to come out if you all don't make sure the teachers are safe."

There has been a torrent of opposition on social media. In the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee Facebook group, a retired educator commented, "I have retired, but if I were going back I would still wear a kn95 mask, and have a big stockpile of them. I don't see any sense in taking a chance when wearing a mask is, or should be, a no-brainer, with some legitimate medical exceptions. I was just looking on the TV at statistics of people who have died from the Delta variant, and I think it was about 99.2% unvaccinated. Well, I have no desire to take a chance of being one of the 0.8%."

The following responses to a post decrying the CDC's reversal on the Facebook group Teachers Against Dying, which had many likes, are representative of the outlook of many teachers:

• "This is BS if vaccinations aren't mandated unless there is a medical condition preventing it! How are we going to know who's vaccinated or not?"

• "A lot of people are going to die (or die sooner) directly because of this decision. Many of them would not if masks were mandated, let alone the vaccine."

• "Yup let's welcome them all back. Oh and while we're at it, why do they have to have ANY vaccines? Let's just SEND EM ALL!!"

Many comments ridiculed and mocked the CDC, with one saying, "CDC - Conflicting Directives Continue" and another "CDC-Capitalist Death Cult."

Another post replying to the CDC's blatant disregard for the well-being of children stated, "The COVID Distribution Center doesn't care about that."

Many teachers pointed to the underlying economic motives behind the back-to-school campaign, with one commenting, "America doesn't care as long as they get the kids out of the house." Another replied, "Exactly. It's about capitalism not saving lives. Profits over people once again. It just makes me so angry that CDC doesn't seem to care about kids."

A post with over 200 likes in Teachers Against Dying simply read, in big letters: "Dear CDC, we still don't have vaccines for 0-11, in case you forgot."

On the Facebook group #TeacherProblems, a post calling for responses decried the CDC's reversal, stating, "This personally frustrates me because I know that the school isn't going to keep track of who is vaccinated and who is not … meaning unvaccinated individuals who are against masks aren't going to wear them."

These are two of the representative replies to the post:

• "In my state even those who are vaccinated are getting the new variant. Bad enough to be hospitalized."

• "Nope. I am fully vaccinated and I will be wearing a mask. My 9 year old daughter, who has not been vaccinated, will also be wearing a mask. The Delta variant has us a little on edge right now. I need to see how things will pan out before I am comfortable with no masks completely."

Several educators wrote responses to a request by this author for statements, including the following:

• "The CDC has shown itself to be just as politicized under Biden as it was under the tyrant. In our current dystopia, profits still take primacy over health. Tragically, this time around, many children will be at even greater risk, because at least before there were mask mandates. Neoliberalism always paves the way for further tyranny!"

• "The CDC is nothing but a political tool and they have not been interested in safety, science, or reality this entire pandemic. Vaccinations need to be required for everyone in a school building and masks need to be required for everyone until they all get vaccinated. Anything less is unsafe and will put children, staff, and their family members in the hospital and in the morgue. Legitimate scientists and doctors have been clear on this. The infrastructure of this country depends on the free babysitting during the day of schools, but we need to stop sacrificing students and school staff for this nation's blood money—which is all the CDC has ever been doing."

There is undoubtedly mass opposition to the homicidal reopening policies of the ruling elite, as shown by teachers' responses. The principal barrier between the desires of educators to defend their lives and livelihoods, as well as that of their students, their families, and the general public, is both a political and an organizational one. The unions have isolated educators' struggles at every turn and work to disorient the opposition by instilling illusions in the Democratic party and the Biden administration, as well as dividing educators against each other and other workers through the promotion of racialist politics.

Teachers must form rank-and-file committees independent of the unions, uniting with broader sections of the working class in the US coming into struggle. All those who wish to fight for this perspective should contact us to get involved.

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