

As pandemic toll rises, New Mexico does partial about-face on vaccinations and masks, but not on school and work reopenings

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With the Delta variant of COVID-19 gaining ground nationwide, New Mexico state and local authorities have taken a number of belated measures that partially reverse policies approved barely five weeks before. Nonetheless, they have adamantly stuck to their policy of full reopening of schools and businesses.

The Albuquerque Public School (APS) board voted July 28 to require all students, staff and visitors to wear masks indoors, including on buses, regardless of vaccination status. The decision came after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revised its reckless July 9 recommendation dropping mask requirements for vaccinated people and issued new mask guidances on July 27 recommending that “fully vaccinated people wear masks in public indoor settings to help prevent the spread of the delta variant and protect others.”

However, APS held fast to its disastrous and criminal Aug. 11 reopening of K-12 schools for in-person instruction for the 2021-2022 school year, much as schools throughout the state. Out of the 74,500 students enrolled at APS, 39,600, or roughly half of all students, corresponding to those in grade 6 and under, will be going in without any vaccines at all, while pediatric cases soar across the country. In New Mexico, those under 20 already comprise roughly one in five of all COVID cases, while those under 10 comprise 6 percent.

According to the New Mexico Department of Health (DOH), about 53 percent of New Mexican youth 12 to 17 years old have received at least one dose and only 40.8 percent are fully vaccinated. Of those 18+ years old, the figures were 74.2 and 65.5 percent respectively as of Aug. 10. Under these conditions, the virus will be allowed to rip through the student population of the state, leaving many children dead or with potentially long term cognitive health issues, which have been described as worse than a stroke or lead poisoning.

The unions have worked to enforce this policy as well. American Federation of Teacher President Randi Weingarten, who infamously demanded fully in-person education in May, visited Rio Rancho, a city just west of Albuquerque, on August 5 as part of a nationwide tour aimed to convince parents and teachers to accept in-person classes. Weingarten said at her visit that the AFT has provided 65 grants across the nation, totaling \$5 million and affecting 20 million students, to reopen districts.

Democratic Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham signed an executive order July 29, and which took effect August 2, requiring all state employees to either be fully vaccinated or get tested for COVID-19 regularly. Those not fully vaccinated “shall be required to demonstrate a negative COVID-19 test every two weeks,” according to the order. Only those who are not fully vaccinated must wear a mask indoors,

with exceptions for eating and drinking, and “may be subject to disciplinary action, including termination, in accordance with applicable law.”

The University of New Mexico (UNM) also did an about-face from its previous policy on August 2 and announced that staff and students would be required to get their COVID-19 vaccine for the fall semester. The administrative mandate applies to anyone accessing university facilities or participating in activities on any UNM campus. New Mexico State University followed suit August 6, mandating either full vaccination or weekly testing and requiring masks.

These measures, though not sufficient, are a far cry from a little more than a month ago. On June 18, the Office of the Governor announced, “Beginning July 1, all pandemic-related occupancy restrictions on all forms of commercial activity will be lifted. All businesses across the state may once again operate at 100 percent of maximum capacity.”

“Facemasks, in accordance with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] guidance, have not been required in New Mexico for individuals who have completed their vaccination series since May 14.” The statement continued, “There have been no state travel restrictions or requirements since mid-February.”

In a sop to at least a pretense of some precaution, the announcement said, “The state will continue to follow CDC guidance with respect to face-coverings: Masks will remain required for unvaccinated individuals, and businesses, workplaces and tribes may continue to require masks for employees, customers or visitors on the premises, regardless of vaccination status, at their discretion.”

The announcement also noted that, according to the state’s color-coded COVID-19 risk rating system, all counties would no longer be under the minimal restriction level of “Turquoise.”

On June 30, Albuquerque’s Democrat mayor, Tim Keller, sent out his online newsletter, entitled, “Albuquerque, we made it!” He declared, “As we get ready to lift capacity restrictions and fully reopen our City this week, I am filled with gratitude for every Burqueño [resident of “Burque,” i.e., Albuquerque] who helped us get here.”

After naming the mass-spreader events that Burqueños could attend—museums, pools, senior centers, large special events, etc.—Keller gave hypocritical lip service to the victims of his and his party’s own policy, “Although our city is buzzing with excitement, I know this week does not come without pain and heartache. So many in our community lost friends and family to COVID-19...” In a cynical and worthless phrase, he concluded, “Our thoughts and

prayers are with those in mourning.”

The reopening drive was given further impetus by President Joe Biden, who absurdly announced on July 4 to an unmasked crowd at the White House South Lawn, “Today we’re closer than ever to declaring our independence from a deadly virus... We can live our lives, our kids can go back to school. . .” and repeated the shopworn claim made a year before by then-President Trump that “our economy is roaring back.”

On July 8, the state’s Department of Health (DOH) announced that it would not require students to be vaccinated against COVID-19 ahead of the new school year. DOH cabinet secretary Dr. Tracie Collins said that, despite the Pfizer vaccine being authorized for 12-year-olds and up, the state could not mandate vaccines for public school students. “Until we have regular use approval, we cannot move in that direction,” she claimed. “And so, it won’t be anytime soon from the DOH moving towards requiring the COVID vaccine. We like to encourage as many people as possible to get vaccinated if they’re eligible.”

On the same day UNM announced that it would not require students to be vaccinated. A university spokesperson later used a survey claiming a majority of students and staff did not want mandatory vaccination, referred to the lack of FDA approval, the difficulty of enforcement and other factors in an attempt to justify the decision.

A number of public events followed on the heels of the governor’s and mayor’s announcements. In Albuquerque, fireworks shows were held at Balloon Fiesta Park and several other parks, and Old Town, a favorite tourist attraction, was flooded with locals and out-of-state tourists who attended band concerts and packed souvenir shops. The annual Rainbow Gathering in the Carson National Forest near Taos drew more than 5,000 for the first week of July.

The Santa Fe Opera, which originally offered parking lot performances on huge LED video screens, steadily increased its available seat sales as restrictions relaxed. With attendees eventually able to sit as close as one seat apart and with no system of checking for proof of vaccination, regulations became virtually meaningless.

In short, the pandemic was treated as no longer an issue, and it was time to get back to business as usual, i.e., the full-speed-ahead reopening of businesses and schools.

One of the few inhibiting factors in the drive for full reopening has been the difficulty for businesses to find enough full-time employees. Owners of restaurants and shops have complained that applicants have been fewer than expected. Many prospective employees, however, are reluctant to apply for jobs because they are reluctant to enter unsafe work environments, especially at the pitiful wages these businesses pay.

A July 14 Albuquerque-area NBC affiliate article on the situation concluded with a possible “solution” to the employers’ dilemma: “Unemployment benefits are set to be reduced starting Sept. 15th.”

Schools are facing the same staff shortages, for the same reasons, and they have held job fairs to attract applicants.

The results of the elimination of public health measures have been entirely predictable. The number of cases and deaths began rising, and by July 18, New Mexico was averaging about 134 cases a day, more than double the average of 62 from just two weeks before. As of July 20, cumulative COVID-related cases in the state, with a population of 2.1 million, had reached 207,701, and 4,387 deaths. Most of the latest waves of cases and deaths have been of unvaccinated people, impelling the DOH to revive its \$100 per person incentive to get vaccinated.

Mayor Keller was slow on the uptake. His July 27 “Looking forward to our bright future” newsletter discussed crime and his bond proposal for a multi-use stadium for the local soccer teams’ games and other events. The words “COVID-19,” “pandemic,” “mask” and “vaccination” were nowhere to be seen in the newsletter. The letter stated, “As our summer youth programs wind down, registration for Fall before and after school programs, camps, clubs, and more are opening soon.” He concluded his letter with the slogan, “Back to School is almost Here!”

As cases grew, Keller hosted a “COVID-19 update” on Aug. 5 and announced that the city reinstated its mask mandate Aug. 2, requiring people to wear a mask inside city facilities, regardless of vaccination status. Dr. Mark DiMenna of Albuquerque’s Environmental Health Department urged unvaccinated residents to get their shot, noting that although vaccines don’t guarantee immunity to the virus, vaccination lessens their risk appreciably, and most cases and deaths were of unvaccinated people.

While masking and vaccinations are essential, they are not sufficient. The effectiveness of masks is lessened in classrooms or other indoor places with insufficient ventilation and cleaning, and in crowded settings where social distancing is impossible. Vaccination significantly decreases the likelihood of severe illness but is much less effective against the Delta variant and appears to drop after several months. Recent data from the Ministry of Health in Israel, where vaccinations began relatively early, suggest the Pfizer vaccine is now only 39 percent effective at preventing COVID-19 infections.

Measures like lockdowns, online learning and working, contact tracing and information sharing on an international scale have already been proven to slow the spread of the pandemic, but they are stymied by the relentless drive of the ruling class to get parents of students back to work pumping out profit, a policy embraced by the unions and the Democratic and Republican Party alike.

Teachers, parents, students and workers more broadly must join and build rank and file committees, independent of the Democrats, Republicans and unions, in order to enforce the necessary measures to end the pandemic, and to oppose the sabotage of public health measures by both parties in the interests of private profit.



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