

Coronavirus health disaster in Los Angeles looms with reopening of country's second largest school district

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More than 600,000 Los Angeles public school students and 24,000 teachers returned to in-person instruction Monday for the start of the 2021-2022 school year. While the majority of parents and students had opted to continue virtual classes when buildings reopened in the spring, now the country's second largest school district is giving virtually no remote learning options at all, as the highly infectious Delta variant is leading to a massive increase in cases, hospitalizations and deaths among children.

The reopening of Los Angeles schools is a major step in the drive to fully reopen schools across the US. The American capitalist class of today is deliberately sacrificing the lives of children for the sake of profits. More than 1,000 school campuses in Los Angeles alone are being reopened to eliminate all remaining restrictions on economic activity and put parents back to work creating profits.

On Sunday, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health recorded 3,356 new cases of the virus, a 51 percent increase over the prior two weeks, and eight deaths, but noted that both figures are an undercount due to weekend reporting delays. Such grim reports and figures are only a taste of what is to come with the full reopening of school systems like LAUSD.

The only remote learning option available for parents and students will be the district's independent study program, City of Angels (COA), which has traditionally been granted to child actors, young Olympic athletes and others unable to maintain a consistent classroom presence.

In line with recently passed California legislation requiring districts to provide independent study programs as the de facto form of distance learning in schools, LAUSD has extended its independent study program to include students "whose health would be put at risk by in-person instruction."

With minimal interaction with a live teacher, students able to successfully utilize independent study typically come from wealthier backgrounds with parents able to pay for independent tutors and other expensive learning resources. Such resources are not at the disposal of the majority of LAUSD students and their families, where about 75 percent of students come from low-income families qualifying for free school lunches.

Additionally, the process for enrolling in the program is extremely Byzantine. One couple interviewed by *LAist* magazine said they attempted to contact the district five times after filling out the required enrollment forms, without receiving a single response. At the start of the current academic year, less than three percent of LAUSD students were able to successfully enroll in independent learning.

The district is sitting on a mountain of cash from federal COVID-19 relief funding, with a \$13.8 billion operating budget for this year, a 62 percent increase over last year's budget, yet nothing has been done to keep students, staff and their families safe.

The only additional measures being proposed by LAUSD to help contain the virus are weekly testing and the quarantining of COVID-positive students and staff. In positive cases, only the parents of a handful of close proximity students will be notified after the event. At most, individual classrooms might be closed but not entire campuses, according to the LA Department of Health.

The district has no measures in place for adequate ventilation and air filtration, with even communal drinking fountains turned back on after being shut down earlier in the pandemic. No social distancing measures have been enacted within hallways and classrooms, and no learning plans are in place for students who have to quarantine after testing positive.

"I truly believe it's not safe for our kids or even the staff," one LAUSD teacher told the WSWS. "Kids were allowed to eat lunch inside the cafeteria with no social distancing. Temperatures are being taken at the entrance, and we have to fill out a daily wellness survey, but that's it. I'm so glad I chose to keep my kids online, but I have no choice but to return to work."

An LAUSD parent told the WSWS, "They're saying numbers are rising, but they do not give a crap. I can't believe how they're risking our kids' lives by opening up the schools."

Many parents in the Facebook group Parents Supporting Teachers expressed concerns over lack of safety measures on the first day of school. Parents shared pictures and videos of densely crowded lines snaking around school buildings with students and parents waiting for symptom checks, in many cases up to two hours before even setting foot in a crowded classroom.

Additionally, dozens of parents who opted to have their children out of in-person learning report that they were forced to wait the entire day for a link to start class for their child.

The return to in-person learning is part of a nationwide effort spearheaded by the Biden administration and carried out in California by Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom, proving the Democrats are equally as committed as their fascistic Republican counterparts to subordinating public health measures to profit interests.

While carrying out this deadly policy, the Democrats, aided by the right-wing opposition of Republicans such as Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, are reframing the entire "debate" over reopening schools around the wearing masks. However, public health experts have

shown that masks and vaccinations, in and of themselves, are not sufficient to stop the spread of the pandemic if they are not connected to a comprehensive effort to stop the virus's chain of transmission, including through a program of rigorous contact tracing, social distancing and the shutdown of schools and nonessential production.

The Democrats are carrying out this campaign with the full support of the teachers unions, the American Federation of Teachers under Randi Weingarten and the National Education Association under Becky Pringle. Weingarten, who publicly declared recently that reopening schools is her top priority, is leading a propaganda blitz on newspapers, television networks and social media aimed at deliberately keeping the dangers of in-person learning hidden from millions of parents and teachers.

On Sunday, Weingarten tweeted: "We're going #Back2School for third straight school year under the cloud of #COVID19, and more than 40% of eligible Americans having not gotten vaccinated. All this leaves me anguishing over what it will take to break this nightmarish cycle."

The local United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), which is hailed by the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America as a "militant" and "progressive" union, is also actively promoting the return-to-classroom campaign. In the first week of August, the union held a virtual leadership conference in which it encouraged "members to envision a physical return to campus that is transformative for our students and communities—not a return to the status quo."

This is part of the UTLA's campaign for "Schools LA students deserve," which focuses on racial politics as a means of distracting attention away from the inadequate funding of materials and safety measures for all teachers and students, along with the murderous drive for in-person learning which will affect students of all ethnic backgrounds.

Last winter, when LAUSD schools were still conducting remote learning, the UTLA conducted a vote of its membership giving teachers the option to return to classrooms with either no safety measures in place or completely minimal safety measures. No option was given to teachers to continue teaching remotely. When a similar vote was taken for the current academic year, almost half of UTLA members abstained from voting altogether, an indication of a complete lack of confidence by teachers in the union to keep them safe.

The district has attempted to assuage teachers' and parents' fears by pointing to what limited measures are in place, including mandatory masking for all students and staff while indoors, along with mandatory vaccinations for all teachers and staff by October 15. The Chicago Public School system also adopted an identical vaccine mandate, also with an October 15 deadline after the Los Angeles measure passed.

Even leaving aside the fact that tens of thousands of vaccinated Americans are being infected by the Delta variant every week, according to a leaked CDC report, this two-month deadline will provide ample time for the virus to spread widely throughout the school system.

The UTLA and LAUSD, however, are both well aware that the masking and vaccination measures will have only a limited impact. An estimated 85 percent and 65 percent of teachers and staff, respectively, have already received at least one dose of the vaccine. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, while lack of masking within schools nationwide will result in infection rates of up to 75 percent within the next three months, universal and consistent mask wearing will still result in significant infection rates of 20 percent or more within the same time frame.

In fact, coronavirus cases among children already began to skyrocket in advance of the school openings. On Sunday, National Institutes of Health Director Francis Collins related horrifying figures to Fox News host Chris Wallace. "I think traditionally people kind of considered, 'Well, you know, kids aren't going to get sick with this,'" he said. "More than 400 children have died of COVID-19. And right now, we have almost 2,000 kids in the hospital, many of them under the age of four. So anybody who tried to tell you, 'Well, don't worry about the kids, the virus won't really bother them,' that's not the evidence. And especially with Delta being so contagious, kids are very seriously at risk."

A weekly report from the American Academy of Pediatrics recently noted 121,427 new pediatric cases during the second week of August, or 14 percent of the total. There has been an exponential surge in cases among children since mid-June, when reported new cases for that week amounted to roughly 8,000.

While he did not draw the obvious conclusion, Collins's remarks are an obvious refutation of the policies of the Biden administration, which shortly after taking office named as one of its central goals that all US schools will be open for in-person learning during his first 100 days in office.

While Biden was elected in large measure based on his pledge to "follow the science" in contrast to the fascistic ravings of Trump, he and the Democrats have been no less a constant source of disinformation and lies about the virus. In February, while the coronavirus was filling up hospitals and intensive care units across the country, Biden infamously told an eight-year-old girl at a town hall meeting, "Kids don't get COVID very often. It's unusual for that to happen. They don't—the evidence so far is children aren't the people most likely to get COVID."

In May, the CDC lifted masking requirements for vaccinated Americans, and on July 4, Biden went on national television to instruct the American population to "take your mask off, you've earned the right." Since then, at least an additional 50,000 American people have lost their lives, and hospitals are once again being filled to capacity and beyond.

A crime of historic proportions is underway which can only be stopped by a coordinated intervention by the working class. The Socialist Equality Party calls on all parents, workers and students to form rank-and-file committees as part of a national and international campaign to stop the murderous school reopening drive. Sign up below to join the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, sister committees that exist in New York City, Chicago, Detroit, Texas, Alabama and other cities and states, or to build a new one in your school district.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact