

COVID-19 cases skyrocket in Los Angeles schools, exposing pretense of “safe reopening”

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In the four days since the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second largest district in the US with over 600,000 students, reopened on Monday, multiple positive infections have been detected in various school sites. The mitigation measures touted by the district in advance of reopening, while wholly inadequate to stop the spread of the virus, have not even been systematically implemented across the district, and the dilapidated infrastructure of many of the district’s over 1,000 schools is proving to be an insurmountable barrier in providing necessary ventilation to limit the spread of the airborne virus.

Interim LAUSD Superintendent Megan Reilly spent opening day running from campus to campus telling everyone that schools were safe, and that “everyone needs to understand the many layers and how our safety protocol works.” According to Reilly, “We’ve created here at Los Angeles Unified some of the safest environments. It’s a controlled environment. It’s safer in many of our schools than it is out in the public.”

According to data released Thursday by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH), 118 students and staff tested positive in the 24 hours from Tuesday to Wednesday morning. 107 of those cases were K-12 students who were on campuses during that time. Ten outbreaks and nine clusters have been reported associated with the positive cases and 56 of those cases were reportedly isolated cases. Only positive cases and close contacts, or people who were within 3 feet of the infected individual for longer than 15 minutes, have been notified and asked to quarantine.

On Wednesday, the LACDPH recorded 34 new deaths and 4,046 new infections, with 1,790 people in local hospitals with the virus and 406 people in intensive care units. Hospitalizations increased by more than 100 over the previous day. Since the beginning of

the pandemic, there have been 1.36 million cases in Los Angeles County with 24,952 deaths.

LAUSD has implemented a program to test all students and staff once per week regardless of vaccination status. On Monday night, LAUSD released their baseline COVID-19 results from tests of students and staff during the two weeks prior to the first day of school, which found 3,255 positive cases among students and 399 cases among school employees.

However, 19 percent of students did not get tested through the district during this period. LAUSD asks that students not participating in the school testing program get tested through an outside site, but will not include these results in its overall data reports. With 451,026 students returning to in-person schooling, that would mean about 85,694 of those students were not included in the reported baseline test results.

Still, the baseline data presented online Monday night was quickly removed by Tuesday morning.

Some school sites only tested students on campus Monday morning and allowed students to go to class the entire day, only to have some students informed later that evening they had tested positive. On social media, parents have expressed outrage and concern that their child, or a student in their child’s classrooms, tested positive and was on campus during the week. Such conditions, in the context of a very high transmission rate in Los Angeles County and an 18–72 hour window of viral shedding before showing a positive test, expose the LAUSD testing program as nothing but safety theater.

Dr. Jorge A. Caballero spoke out on Twitter in opposition to alarming case rates in LAUSD schools. On Monday, he tweeted that based on the LAUSD COVID-19 dashboard, case rates at 59th Street Elementary School were 77.81 per 100,000, far above

the community case rate of 37.71 per 100,000. Caballero wrote, “I’d like to meet the ‘optimists’ and ask them what they think about most LAUSD schools showing this kind of disparity in case rate.”

Many parents have spoken out on social media to express their outrage and in opposition to the lack of and poor implementation of safety measures in the schools.

One parent exclaimed, “Let’s all protest and not send our kids to school by going on strike until LAUSD, the governor, the state legislature provides the same online virtual learning as last year before all the kids get covid and thousands die!”

Another parent of a South Gate High School student posted on the LAUSD Facebook page, “Yesterday was my daughter’s first day at school. They came home complaining that there is no AC in [any] of their classes. Not sure how they expect the kids to learn when they can’t even concentrate because it’s too hot, or when they can’t even hear the teacher because the fan they have in the classroom is too loud. Come on, South Gate High School! You guys had enough time this whole past year with no kids in school. You guys could’ve fixed the AC in the classrooms!!”

According to the *LA Times*, many classrooms throughout the district do not have working air conditioning and in at least two schools, the entire HVAC systems are not working. Yet, according to interim Superintendent Reilly, “We believe Los Angeles Unified has the highest COVID safety standards of any public school district in the nation. Our preparations for the new school year include continuing to require masking for all students, staff, and visitors; maximizing physical distancing as much as possible; continuing comprehensive sanitizing efforts, including frequent hand washing; upgraded air filtration systems; requiring vaccines for employees and COVID testing for employees and students.”

Social distancing measures are also not being implemented. According to the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) website, physical distancing within the schools must be consistent with county guidelines, and those guidelines “currently require districts to maintain physical distancing to the degree that allows for daily attendance by all students.”

This essentially makes a mockery of social distancing guidelines when one considers the size of the typical

class in the district. As one parent said on Facebook, her daughter’s first day of transitional kindergarten had “no social distancing, two kids per desk, desks close together, plus 25 kids in her class and maybe more.”

One parent commented angrily, “Students are not even distanced when unmasked during lunch.” Or as another parent exclaimed, “2nd day back and already too many students are exposed! It’s time to rethink opening zoom back up with the regular teachers at the normal school.”

The United Teachers Los Angeles union, which rammed through a deal to reopen schools in the spring without even the pretense of a vote, is once again playing a leading role in facilitating reopenings. Since schools opened Monday, the union has not even said a word about unsafe conditions throughout the district, instead focusing attention on getting teachers to vote in the recall election for Governor Gavin Newsom.

This shows that teachers, students and parents must organize themselves not only against the school district and city government, but the union as well. The *World Socialist Web Site* is fighting to build such organizations in the form of educator rank-and-file safety committees across the country.

The West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee meets next Saturday, August 28 at 2 p.m. PDT. Sign up now to register for the meeting and become involved.



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