

As New Mexico continues to push for in-person instruction 109 schools report COVID-19 cases

D. Lencho**20 August 2021**

Within less than a week after the reckless August 11 reopening, several New Mexico public schools have closed and reverted to virtual learning due to growing numbers of COVID-19 cases. By Monday, schools in Albuquerque, Belen, Carlsbad, Los Lunas and Roswell had shut down.

Illustrating the disastrous anti-working class role of the unions, by Wednesday two schools in Rio Rancho, where American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten held a press conference August 5 urging full reopening and in-person instruction, closed at least for the remainder of the week. Weingarten later retweeted an article from a local paper entitled “Union: RR [Rio Rancho] Schools are Safe.” Suffice to say, this has been proven false.

As of Thursday 109 schools around the state recorded at least two COVID-19 cases according to the state Environment Department. Those infected include students, staff and faculty. New Mexico does not report the total number of cases in school or the age distribution of cases, so it is unknown how many children, teachers and staff have so far been infected as a result of school reopenings.

The Delta variant has brought a renewed spike in hospitalizations across New Mexico, overloading the already stressed health care system. Medical director of Presbyterian, Dr. Denise Gonzales, speaking to a local CBS affiliate on August 10, stated that, “In Presbyterian hospitals statewide, we’re experiencing a doubling of cases each week. Three weeks ago, we had about 22 patients, last week about 45 and this week, we nearly have 90 patients hospitalized with COVID.”

The report notes, “Albuquerque doctors said the virus is now targeting a certain group of people and it now includes kids.” The overwhelming majority of patients are unvaccinated.

On August 13, the New Mexico Department of Health (DOH) issued an urgent call for volunteer nurses to sign up for the state’s Medical Reserve Corps. The DOH is appealing to retired health workers or anyone with a medical

license to volunteer. More than 2,750 volunteers have been deployed.

With cases per day climbing, state agencies anticipate anywhere from 900 to 1,500 new cases a day by late August or early September. As of August 17, worldometers.info reported that New Mexico had suffered 221,086 total cases and 4,455 deaths.

With this dire and foreseeable situation worsening, Democratic Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham held a COVID-19 news conference on August 17, her first since April 28, with her cabinet secretary for the New Mexico Human Services Department, Dr. David Scrace. While presenting facts speaking to the dire nature of the situation, the two none-the-less committed to the full reopening of schools, using vaccinations and masks as the justification.

Grisham asserted the oft-repeated claim that “Safe in-person learning is the gold standard.”

This policy is focused not on the elimination of the virus and saving lives, but with opening schools so that parents are not preoccupied with child care and can return to producing profits for businesses. Epidemiologists have detailed the necessity of the comprehensive use of non-pharmaceutical interventions such as lockdowns, remote learning and closing of non-essential businesses, bans on mass gatherings, and other measures in putting an end to the pandemic.

COVID-19 hospitalizations nearly doubled from two weeks before, from 180 to 341, and the totals for the day were four new deaths and 749 new cases.

Facemasks are again required in all public indoor spaces, regardless of vaccination status, effective this Friday until at least September 15. The previous rules aligned with the anti-scientific policy of the CDC, which encouraged the vaccinated not to wear masks as part of Biden’s reopening plans, with Biden himself absurdly declaring “independence” from the virus on the Fourth of July, claiming the vaccinated could unmask. The new mask policy includes all indoor school settings with exceptions for eating

and drinking, aligning with the latest US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance. How masks are supposed to protect hundreds of children eating together in poorly ventilated school cafeterias from an airborne virus, the guidance does not say.

New Mexico requires all hospital workers, workers in congregate care settings and school personnel to be vaccinated starting August 23, with exempt workers requiring a weekly negative COVID-19 test.

With few exceptions, the Delta variant accounts for all new cases in New Mexico. Dr. Scrace noted the similarity on one line graph between the steep upsurge of August-October 2020 and the current one. Hospitalization, both state and nationwide, is exploding, especially among young people.

Dr. Scrace said, “We are seeing significant problems with hospitals filling, problems with transferring people from hospital to hospital, and moving people to higher levels of care when needed. Already this last weekend, we weren’t able to move people who needed to be moved.” Hospitals in New Mexico are approaching level three or crisis level.

Test positivity rates have jumped by almost four times, from 2.5 percent on July 8 to 9.0 percent on August 16. Predictably, the southeastern US, with its lower vaccination rate, is a hotbed of COVID-19 infections, but 24 of New Mexico’s 33 counties are now rated “Red,” i.e., 14 or more cases per 100,000. Six are rated “Orange.”

One graph modeled the effect of masking all students versus only unvaccinated on all daily cases in New Mexico (not just in schools) and found that in the former, the state would have 1,000 cases *per day* whereas in the latter, the number would be 1,400. That “only” 1,000 cases would result from this policy was presented as inevitable, even positive. Virtual learning was not factored into the model.

The question-and-answer period that followed initially seemed to promise a discussion of additional approaches. The first reporter asked, “I’m just wondering that based on the trends of what we’re seeing and what hospitals are bracing for, what it is that makes you confident that these two defenses are sufficient for the next month or two and what is the basis of that confidence or are there other defenses that might be re-instituted?”

Grisham gave a barely intelligible response, saying, “These defenses, particularly masks, we’ve long seen the science that tells us that it does reduce transmission and given that we are wanting to continue this blossoming economic, both recovering opportunity...”

She stumbled and rambled on, “uh, if we mask, that in and of itself and I can show you the numbers just like we did with the schools, if you have the hybrid, 400 cases more per day, if you don’t do a hybrid which is why we’re no longer

doing the hybrid, I can reduce transmission and reduce cases to less than 400 more a day.”

She added, “We actually do that math and plot it out. We’re making tough but necessary decisions right now.” That is, the governor is well aware that 1,000 cases a day, and the inevitable deaths, will result from her policy, but that is viewed as an acceptable price to pay for reopening businesses.

Referring to measures other than vaccines and masks, she said, “I don’t foresee that we have to utilize other tools.” She then went on to then admit, “But make no mistake, we’re in a terrible place for health care services and for protecting our health care workers and too many New Mexicans, again, are going to lose their lives, or have long-term chronic illnesses because of the rate of spread of COVID.”

Despite the outbreaks that have occurred following the reopening, and the ones that are sure to follow, New Mexico Democrats, like their Republican counterparts, will not take the necessary steps to contain the pandemic and save lives. State authorities cannot be relied on to act in the best interests of teachers, students and parents. As the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee said in its February 3 statement :

“To put an end to these homicidal policies and coordinate their response, education workers in New Mexico must organize independently of the unions and Democrats and form a New Mexico Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, joining a network of such committees that have been formed across the country.”



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