

# Southern California teachers return to school to find rat-infested classrooms

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Teachers at Schurr High School in Montebello, an eastern suburb of Los Angeles, returned to their classrooms to prepare for the first day of classes on Monday, August 16.

In the lead-up to reopening across the Montebello Unified School District, whose student body is mostly Hispanic and working class, district officials boasted of work which had been undertaken to prepare campuses for a “safe” return to in-person learning. The school district’s social media pages were filled with photos and videos of workers painting classrooms and deep-cleaning bathrooms and walkways. One district tweet stated, “Wonderful work being done preparing for a safe return!”

Instead, returning teachers found that their classrooms had rat feces covering the floors and desks. The facilities reeked from dead and decomposing rat cadavers, and there were active nests in storage cabinets.

Teacher Al Cueva told the *Los Angeles Times* that he “could hear rats running around in the walls and ceiling.”

After teachers confronted district officials over the ghastly conditions of their classrooms, parents of nearly 2,600 students were emailed late on Friday, August 13, that Schurr High School will remain closed for several more weeks. The school, which was also closed to in-person learning last year, will continue with students on remote independent study programs.

Teachers also voiced outrage over malfunctioning heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems in a building, where most classrooms do not have windows. The lack of ventilation magnifies the threat of COVID-19 for students and teachers.

In a statement to the *Times*, interim Superintendent Mark Skvarna admitted the obvious, declaring, “[T]he

district should have done a better job of identifying the problem in the run-up to reopening.” He added that he “made the decision to close the school largely out of concern that there might be rodent droppings or other health hazards in the HVAC ducts.” Skvarna did not address the implications of malfunctioning HVAC systems in windowless classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teachers have been complaining about rodents and malfunctioning HVAC systems for a long time. Paul Chavez, a Schurr High teacher and faculty president, told the *Times*, “We’re talking even years back. It was a noticeable issue.”

Chavez recounted teachers sitting through meetings on the campus “and having rats fall out of the tile ceilings and scurry to the next classroom.” He added, “I just felt like band aids were put on this situation when a little bit more attention needed to be addressed.”

In July, when Chavez returned to the campus to assist with summer school, he found his desk “littered with rat feces.” He brought his personal shop vacuum to clean the mess and then sanitized all of the desks in his classroom. He initially thought this was the extent of the squalor until last Monday when other teachers returned to their classrooms to find that they too were filthy and infested.

Superintendent Skvarna announced that Schurr High should reopen after a 15-day cleaning period. Speaking to the *Times*, he said, “I don’t have the current plan of attack. I’m dealing with the HVAC issue, the cleaning of the rooms, the sanitizing of the rooms.” He added, “We’re trying to get these facilities up to standards. I don’t believe they were before. I believe we need to put effort and money into it. I don’t believe it’s been a priority.”



The president of the Montebello Teachers Association (MTA), David Navar, told the *Times*, “The tragedy here is for our students, who haven’t been on the site for 18 months. It should be a celebration, a welcoming. Instead they are losing out on valuable instructional minutes, and it’s a tragedy that our students are not getting what they deserve, what they have a right to, which is an education.”

However, the MTA bears responsible for pushing children back to school in pandemic conditions which would have posed intolerable threats to students’ health even without rat infestations and malfunctioning air conditioning. During a webinar this Sunday hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site*, researcher Malgorzata Gasperowicz clearly demonstrated that the only way to end the pandemic is through a comprehensive program combining vaccinations with public health measures, such as the shutdown of schools and nonessential businesses. If implemented on a world scale, such measures would be sufficient to eradicate the virus within a few weeks.

The rat infestation exposes the fraud of the school district and its union enablers, who, after allowing dilapidated and hazardous conditions to exist for years, are now lying to parents about their children returning to clean schools in safety.

Schurr High School is by no means unique. Similar conditions are found at schools around the country. Amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the spread of the particularly virulent Delta variant, schools are breeding grounds for the continued spread of the virus that will undoubtedly result in more hospitalizations and deaths. Within days of reopening, large school districts have been forced to quarantine thousands of students, including over 10,000 in the Tampa, Florida school district alone.

The decline of critical public infrastructure in the United States, including public schools, is a direct result of the squandering of society’s resources on financing capitalist private profit, rather than human need. The same profit motive has emerged as the main barrier to ending the pandemic.



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