

California school reopenings have already caused thousands of COVID-19 infections

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Less than two weeks after the full reopening of California public schools, thousands of students and staff have tested positive for COVID-19 and tens of thousands have gone into quarantine.

Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) opened on August 16 and has already recorded 2,002 cases. Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) has reported 214 cases since opening on August 9, with 12 classes, or approximately 370 students, placed on quarantine. Elk Grove Unified School District (EGUSD) has reported 242 positive COVID-19 cases and 1,485 students on quarantine since opening August 13. Just over a week after students returned to classrooms, 60 students and educators in Turlock Unified School District tested positive, with over 500 confirmed close contacts. Despite case rates far in excess of those seen at the start of last school year, there is no discussion among school administration or state and local government about a return to online education.

Most schools opened under the California Public Health Department (CPHD) guidelines for education. These guidelines include universal masking for students, as well as vaccination or weekly surveillance testing of staff. Requirements for hand washing facilities and daily cleaning are included. There are also toothless “recommendations” for improved ventilation, which have not been implemented in most classrooms across the state. What is not included are any requirements for physical distancing.

Following the determinations of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), CPHD claims, “Recent evidence indicates that in-person instruction can occur safely without minimum physical distancing requirements when other mitigation strategies (e.g., masking) are implemented.” This means that students, many of whom are too young to qualify for vaccination, are returning to overcrowded and poorly ventilated

classrooms with only masks for protection.

The CPHD also has provided confusing guidance for quarantine. When a student reports a case of COVID-19 to the school, quarantine is required for all “close contacts” of the student who is ill. A “close contact” is someone who has spent more than 15 minutes within six feet of the infected person over a period of 24 hours. As physical distancing is no longer being enforced, the “close contacts” of an infected person can easily be an entire class. A quarantined “close contact” must stay home for 10 days. Those who test positive must remain home 10 days or until they are without fever for 24 hours, whichever is longer. Either may also return to school after six days with two negative COVID-19 tests.

A recent outbreak, in the first week of attendance, shut down classes at Foster City in Northern California. Parents received an email on Saturday afternoon indicating that all fourth and fifth graders were considered “close contacts” and would need a negative COVID-19 test in order to return to school.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a mother affected by the shutdown in Foster City. She commented, “There was a positive case in my son’s class and I got a letter. They will notify kids that sit within six feet of the positive kid, but not the rest [of the class]. There’s a ‘modified quarantine’ for kids that sit within six feet.”

The entire family had to get tested for COVID-19 and her child needed two negative tests in order to return to class. The next day she received the second letter about the outbreak, which stated that all students needed testing. “That’s like 300 kids,” she continued. “Everyone in Foster City is scrambling to get their kids tested.”

The local free testing site had a long line and wouldn’t post results for 48 hours. “The school said they’d accept a rapid test and everyone’s looking for those. We picked up two at-home tests from CVS. All the clinics are charging \$150-250 for the rapid test. I’m stocking up on at-home

tests. Who knows how often this is going to happen?”

As a result of the chaotic and reckless school reopening drive, working parents will have the added expense of frequent COVID-19 tests or will need to arrange child care for lengthy quarantines, which itself increases risk of exposure to the virus.

Another Bay Area parent told the WSWS, “I don’t understand why we can’t even have an option for at-home school again. A lot of people are still working from home. I understand some people can’t stay home now but why do we all need to crowd our kids into the schools? Doesn’t that just raise the risk for everyone?”

Experts say it does. A recent panel of leading scientists hosted by the WSWS demonstrated that rigorous public health measures, including universal testing, contact tracing, masking, social distancing and the closure of schools and nonessential workplaces, combined with a mass global vaccination program, could quickly bring the pandemic to an end. Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz presented epidemiological models confirming that public health measures such as school closures are, in fact, more important than vaccinations in the fight against COVID-19.

Currently, if parents choose to keep their children home, the only public education option for most school districts in the state is California’s Independent Study program. The program requires families to identify a supporting teacher or determine how to meet unclear home schooling requirements. Alternatively, they may seek a private teacher or “pod” at the cost of around \$25,000 per student. The steep learning curve or cost of alternatives to in-person learning place them outside the capabilities of most working families.

The fact that a return to online instruction is not even being publicly discussed by school administrators, the media or the Democratic Party-run California government is a damning indictment of the capitalist response to the pandemic. The rapid rise in cases after just one or two weeks of instruction has shattered their claims that universal masking will somehow prevent the rapid spread of the Delta variant among students and staff. Children and educators across California are being knowingly sent into unsafe buildings, along with their brothers and sisters across the US and much of the world.

The Democratic Newsom administration is hanging on for its life amid a right-wing recall campaign led by forces advocating the complete abandonment of public health measures such as mask-wearing. After spending all summer insisting that schools reopen in-person and not

offer online learning, Newsom is fearful that closing in-person learning could galvanize his opponents and spell the end of his political career.

Parents and educators, on the other hand, do not want their children or families to get sick and die. In their struggle to ensure the safety of children and all of society, parents and educators confront not only the Democratic Party, but also the teachers unions. On Tuesday, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten toured schools in California as part of her 20-state “Back to School for All” tour. Under conditions in which the present school reopening campaign could cause tens of millions of children to become infected with COVID-19 and potentially thousands to die in the US alone, Weingarten’s actions can only be described as criminal.

Over the past year, educators and parents across California and the US formed rank-and-file safety committees, completely independent of and in opposition to the Republican and Democratic parties as well as the teachers unions, to fight for the closure of all schools until the pandemic is contained. It is essential that these committees be expanded into every district across California, in unity with workers in other industries, to carry out the necessary measures to stop the spread of infections and deaths.

As a special education teacher in Oakland, Socialist Equality Party gubernatorial candidate David Moore has fought for the development of rank-and-file committees and will be speaking this Saturday at a meeting of the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees. We call on all educators and parents to attend this Saturday’s meeting at 2 p.m. PDT.



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