

Massachusetts education board strips COVID safety guidelines as K-12 students return to school

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As coronavirus cases from the highly transmissible Delta variant continue to climb in Massachusetts, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), supported by the teachers unions, is forcing every child across the state back into school. Behind the feigned concern for children's wellbeing lies the scientific reality of what will transpire over the coming months if this is allowed to take place. As children and teachers infected in the tens or hundreds of thousands spread out through the community at large, hundreds of thousands more will become infected.

The DESE's school reopening guidelines, issued July 30, begins, "For the fall, all districts and schools will be required to be in-person, full-time, five days a week, and all DESE health and safety requirements will be lifted. This includes all physical distancing requirements."

Physical distancing of 3 feet, following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines, would have little impact in curbing transmission in schools. However, the lifting of physical distancing requirements now has everything to do with allowing for schools to run at full capacity with limited numbers of classrooms and teachers.

Last year, schools could only maintain some form of distancing while a large portion of the student body was learning remotely. Since the beginning of the pandemic, DESE has had as its main imperative the return of students to classrooms, no matter the danger. However, it is only now, under conditions of mass infections, that the mandate that all schools return to full, in-person learning has been realized. The goal of every aspect of DESE's fall opening guidelines is to keep schools open and filled with children during active community transmission of a debilitating and deadly virus.

In a recent statement aimed at diverting attention from the deadly policies of school reopening and directing it instead toward unvaccinated individuals, Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker said, "While Massachusetts leads the nation in

vaccination rates, we are seeing a recent rise in COVID-19 cases because we still need more people to get vaccinated. This step will increase vaccinations among our students and school staff and ensure that we have a safe school reopening."

There is no scientific legitimacy to the claims that COVID-19 does not spread in schools, or that children don't get as sick or spread the virus easily. The Delta variant is indeed contracted and spread by fully vaccinated individuals. Currently, 164 of 569 hospitalized COVID-19 patients in Massachusetts are fully vaccinated. Furthermore, a recent study of breakthrough cases among fully vaccinated nurses showed that 19 percent of cases presented with long COVID symptoms, a similar percentage to that among non-vaccinated individuals. [1]

Modeling shows that with vaccines alone and a vaccination rate of 85 percent with 60 efficacy, the Delta variant, with an estimated R_0 value of 6, would spread at an R_0 of 2.9. (R is a mathematical term that indicates how contagious an infectious disease is and how quickly it reproduces when transmitted to new people.) That is, every one person with COVID-19 would infect 2.9 others, meaning a large wave of exponential growth in case numbers. This means that vaccines alone, no matter how widely administered, when combined with opening up schools and other nonessential businesses, will mean hundreds of thousands if not over a million people infected over the coming months in Massachusetts.

With public health measures alone, without vaccines, the R_0 value with the Delta variant, taken in relation to the public health measures achieved in many countries before vaccines, would drop to $R=1.2-1.4$ [2]. This means that public health measures are *more* effective than vaccines alone. It is only a combination of vaccines and public health measures—the closing of nonessential businesses and schools, robust testing, contact tracing, isolated quarantine locations to protect the families of infected—that would drop

the R0 value below one, allowing for the eradication of the virus.

The lies from last year that if everyone, as Baker said, “played by the rules” and wore masks in schools they would be safe have now been repackaged to blame the unvaccinated for the real crimes that rest with the policy of “herd immunity” and those, like the DESE, who have helped promote it.

The DESE guidelines state, “Massachusetts has among the highest vaccination rates of any state in the nation, and evidence continues to reinforce that the COVID-19 vaccines are highly effective, especially against severe disease. At the same time, even for those students not yet vaccinated, the apparent risk of COVID-19 to children remains small. These factors continue to reinforce that many previously instituted COVID-19 mitigation measures in school settings are no longer necessary.”

Over 700,000 children in Massachusetts are poised to return to in-person learning. No “safe schools” await them and some will die! Many more face potentially debilitating long COVID symptoms, as the virus damages their brains, lungs, hearts and other organs. It is estimated that somewhere between 3 and 12 percent of children will experience long COVID, and it is still unknown how long these symptoms will last, possibly reducing life expectancy.

The US reported 180,000 child COVID-19 cases in the week ending August 19, a 50 percent increase in just one week, according to the latest report from the American Academy of Pediatrics. [3] There were 120,000 child cases the previous week, and less than 10,000 just two months ago.

The Delta variant is also known to be much more dangerous for children. Hospitalizations for children in the US have risen sharply in recent weeks, higher than at any other time during the pandemic, with children comprising 2.3 percent of all hospitalizations. This is clear evidence that the Delta variant, which has been described by some scientists as an almost completely new virus, is much more virulent against children.

Remarkably, the DESE school guidelines also state: “Asymptomatic, fully vaccinated close contacts” are “exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols.” Also exempt are those “exposed to a COVID-19 positive individual in the classroom while both individuals were masked, so long as the individuals were spaced at least 3 feet apart,” who are also “exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols.” This means that significantly large percent of close contacts, who under current guidelines will not be getting tested or quarantining, will be contracting the virus and left in schools to continue transmission.

While masks are important and effective, lower quality

cloth masks, or unfitted masks, are much less effective in stopping viral transmission, especially the highly contagious Delta variant. Epidemiologist Eric Feigl-Ding, sharing data on masking in a Twitter thread, wrote: “One thing that I’m absolutely certain about is that kids need to not only mask, but need premium high filtration masks like this kid’s KF94 mask—which even have adjustable ear loops for a tighter fit.” [4]

The DESE guidelines represent most brazenly the careless and deranged policies that will kill and debilitate large sections of the population. But these guidelines are just one of the many varieties of cosmetic mitigations to COVID transmission stemming from the overarching policy of “herd immunity,” i.e., the mass infection of students, families, teachers and workers. Opposition to the opening of schools is an integral component of a policy of complete elimination of the virus.

The eradication of the virus is possible and must be coordinated on a global basis. Yet this policy is diametrically opposed to the interests of Wall Street, their two capitalist parties, and the pro-capitalist, corporatist trade unions.

To build the foundational forms to wage this struggle the working class must mobilize across borders and industries, on a politically independent basis, through the formation of rank-and-file committees at workplaces, schools and neighborhoods. We urge teachers, students and parents to contact us today to build committees at your school, workplace or neighborhood and fight for a scientific response to save lives and end the pandemic.

Notes:

[1] <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa2109072#.YRK8mDsAjKw.twitter> [2]

<https://twitter.com/GosiaGasperoPhD/status/1418699432036495363/photo/2> [3]

<https://downloads.aap.org/AAP/PDF/AAP%20and%20CHA%20-%20Children%20and%20COVID-19%20State%20Data%20Report%208.19%20FINAL.pdf>

[4] <https://twitter.com/DrEricDing/status/1428171066409635841?s=20>
<https://twitter.com/DrEricDing/status/1428171066409635841?s=20>



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