Schools in Virginia reopen for in-person learning as coronavirus cases and hospitalizations rise steeply in the state

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As COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations reach levels not seen since the high point last winter, school districts across Virginia are reopening for in-person learning, with almost no virtual options available.

Outside of last winter's surge, cases are at their highest point of the pandemic and are continuing to rise. As of September 2, Virginia is reporting 3,281 cases a day. Cases have increased more than 10-fold in two months.

The University of Virginia's Biocomplexity Institute projects that the number of new cases by early October will come very close to, and possibly surpass, the January peak of over 5,700 a day. Hospitalizations in the region are also on a rapid rise. On July 11, daily hospitalizations in the state bottomed out to levels not seen since the early stages of the pandemic in March 2020, with 214. On September 2, that number had risen to 1,725, an 800 percent increase in less than two months.

The troubling rise in cases and hospitalizations comes despite the state having higher than average vaccination rates. While nationally 53.3 percent of the population is fully vaccinated, Virginia's rate is 57.4 percent.

Democrats control the state, with the party having majorities in both the House of Delegates and the Senate and control of the governorship under Ralph Northam. With large Democratic support, a bill was passed in March requiring that all school boards in the state offer in-person instruction for all enrolled students. Virginia Democrats are following the lead of President Joe Biden and his education secretary, Miguel Cardona, who have been pushing for the full reopening of schools since the Biden administration came into office.

Fairfax County, the 11th-largest school district in the country, opened schools on August 23, with no virtual option for over 99 percent of students. Only students who had, by last May, documented an underlying health condition certified by a doctor, could enroll in a virtual option for the 2021-22 school year. Even having a parent or sibling with an underlying condition was not sufficient to qualify for virtual instruction. Only 400 out of 188,000 students were approved for the virtual program.

After the first eight school days, there have been 281 self-reported positive coronavirus cases from students and staff. Given that the school system is not conducting testing, the real numbers are undoubtedly far higher.

While the school system's guidance provides that it " *may* temporarily pause in-person instruction, athletics, or school activities for anyone identified as a potential close contact during … case investigation and contact tracing," it narrowly defines a close contact according to unscientific guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Students within three to six feet of an infected student will not be deemed close contacts if "[b]oth students were engaged in consistent and correct use of well-fitting masks" and unspecified "other K-12 prevention strategies were in place in the K-12 school setting."

Regarding social distancing, the school system acknowledged the obvious, stating that "Because FCPS will be serving over 99% of students in person, physical distancing will not be feasible in most schools. Universal masking is being implemented to mitigate this factor."

There are also no criteria or metrics that will cause the school system to revert to virtual learning. Instead, a school will only close, on a temporary basis, if the county health department directs the school system to do so. Likewise, the entire school system will only move to virtual learning if it is "directed by the local or state health officials, or Executive Order to temporarily close the division as a matter of public health."

Major outbreaks are happening in schools all over the state. Amherst County, in the middle of the state, announced yesterday it was shutting down all schools until September 13. The schools were only open six days. Out of 1,800 people tested on August 31, 198 active cases were found, with more test results pending. By comparison, during the entire school year last year, there were 100 cases among students and staff. The school system is offering no virtual instruction during the pause, with only "self-directed learning opportunities" available.

Hopewell City Public Schools, about 20 miles south of Richmond, had to close all schools on August 20 due to staffing shortages after widespread positive tests. Criminally, the school

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system reopened the following Monday. Similarly, Rappahannock County, a rural county in the northern part of the state, paused in-person classes after only two weeks due to a major COVID-19 outbreak. As in Amherst County, cases in schools after the initial two weeks already surpassed the total from the prior school year.

In Stafford County, about 40 miles south of Washington D.C., the school system has reported 305 student and 20 staff cases after three weeks of school. Just south of Stafford, in the city of Fredericksburg, an entire middle school was forced to shift to virtual instruction for two weeks after multiple outbreaks were reported at the school. The school reported that as a result of the outbreaks, "Student absenteeism is high. Staff capacity is at a critical level."

In Fauquier County, also in northern Virginia, schools have been open three weeks, with 178 positive cases, including 35 cases at one high school. This nearly matches the 191 positive cases that occurred during the entire 2020-21 school year. Fauquier ' s overall seven-day average of daily news cases is as high as it ' s been in the pandemic, except for a few days in January.

Parents, concerned by the dangers presented by the continuing spread of the virus, have organized petitions and demonstrations. In Fairfax County, a petition asking for a virtual option garnered 4,000 signatures in two weeks.

Amit Madon, who initiated the petition, told the local CBS affiliate, "We cannot get solid answers other than 'kids belong in school, that's a recommendation.' No one is doubting that fact. What we are doubting is that we are in a worse condition than we were in January when there was a major surge and the schools were in a virtual mode. Now it seems like we are in a pandemic fatigue of sorts where we are taking this too lightly when the Delta variant has proven it can be absolutely ravaging throughout the country."

Another Fairfax parent, Mallikarjun Vurugu, recently organized a group of parents in Fairfax and nearby Loudon County in a protest in front of his children's school and a school in Loudon County. The group is trying to get the two school systems to offer a virtual option.

"I'm not comfortable sending kids. I'm very frightened," Vurugu explained to the local CBS affiliate.

Another parent in Fairfax County shared with the *World Socialist Web Site* a response he received from a school board member in Fairfax about offering a virtual option. After baldly stating that "Public health guidance and local COVID-level conditions currently support the return to in-person instruction," she told the parent that he must "safeguard … rational thinking, as well as reduc[e] irrational fear." In other words, according to Fairfax County school officials, it is "irrational" to be concerned about having unvaccinated children in schools as the pandemic rages on and children are increasingly being hospitalized, suffering cognitive declines, and even dying.

In Loudon County, concerned parents are inundating school board members, requesting a virtual option. According to *Loudon Now*, school board member Denise Corbo wrote an email recently to the county schools superintendent, Scott Ziegler, stating, "Parents are worried and are begging for online options. At what point will you be more transparent and present a proactive plan and protocols to share with the board?"

While Virginia's governor Ralph Northam recently mandated masks for all students and staff in schools, with no social distancing and no systematic testing program, the Delta variant is set to continue to cause widespread infections so long as schools remain open.

Tragically, just last week, a Fairfax child under 10 years old died of COVID-19, becoming the 11th child in Virginia to die of the disease. About 10-15 percent of infected children also suffer from Long COVID, with symptoms lingering for months or more.

Children who contract COVID-19 are also vulnerable to suffering significant cognitive decline. A July study published in *The Lancet*, "Cognitive Deficits In People Who Have Recovered From COVID-19," determined that people hospitalized with COVID showed "substantial" cognitive performance deficits. Those placed on a ventilator lost roughly seven IQ points, a worse outcome than suffering a stroke. Disturbingly, the study found that even those not hospitalized, but who experienced respiratory difficulty, suffered measurable decreases in cognitive ability.

With cases, hospitalizations and deaths of children mounting across the country, there will certainly be more young people in Virginia sacrificed by the bipartisan drive to reopen schools, unless teachers, parents and students take action to shut the schools down.

With the teachers unions doing all they can to force children back into unsafe schools, concerned parents, teachers and students are encouraged to join the Educators Rank-and- File Safety Committee, the only organized force calling for schools to shut down, along with all nonessential production, in order to save lives and put an end to the pandemic. It is possible to eradicate the pandemic; however, the necessary public health measures, along with full economic support to workers and small businesses, will not be implemented without the mass intervention of the working class, in opposition to the capitalist system.

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