Democrats, teachers unions push school reopenings as pandemic expands across Pennsylvania

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Democratic governor of Pennsylvania Tom Wolf, together with the teachers' unions, are pushing the full reopening of in-person schools even as the growing coronavirus pandemic sweeps across the state.

The seven-day average of new cases stands at a 3,564 new cases a day and continues to rise. Two months ago, there were fewer than 75 new cases, after which most social distancing and other public health measures were lifted.

On August 30, the number of new cases was 2,389, over four times as high as the same time one year ago. Last fall, the partial reopening of schools, with most students learning remotely and class size reduced to 5 or 10 students, produced a massive spike in cases and deaths, overwhelming hospitals and caregivers.

This year, with almost no remote learning, class sizes will return to their previous overcrowded 20, 25 and 30 students per room. One can be certain that COVID cases will explode throughout the state.

Last week, in a political stunt, Wolf ordered a mask mandate in all K-12 schools, pre-schools and child care centers. However, the order only takes effect this week, after all schools have already reopened. The week before, Wolf claimed he did not have the authority to issue a mask mandate and instead called upon the Republican-controlled state legislature, which was in recess, to pass one, knowing full well they wouldn't.

What concerns Wolf is not the safety of the students and staff, but rather the growing anger over the push to reopen schools and force parents back to work, particularly as unemployment benefits and the eviction moratorium are being allowed to expire by the Biden administration.

A mask mandate itself, however, is a red herring under conditions where schools cannot be opened safely under any circumstances Moreover, all other public health measures have already been dropped, including the shutdown of nonessential production, social distancing, contact tracing, vaccinations and others. The state and most school districts have eliminated their COVID dashboards, meaning that teachers, staff, parents and students only find out through the grapevine, if at all.

Both the American Federation of Teachers-Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania State Education Association have endorsed the reopening of in-person learning despite the known risks to students, teachers, staff and the community.

Philadelphia

The state's largest school district with 200,000 students started classes last week.

A high school teacher described the situation. "We've already had two of my colleagues test positive even before classes resumed. We were expecting this after the students came back but not before. That is how transmissible the Delta variant is.

"As far as I can see there is no safety plan this fall. Last spring when they reopened, they were randomly testing 20 percent of the students each week. Now they are saying they will only test after a student shows symptoms.

"That is too late, they can be infectious two days before showing symptoms and many students may be asymptomatic.

"They did install air purifiers, I'll give them that, but everything else is just as bad. These are 100-year-old buildings. Ventilation of outside air is impossible for many places. Hallways, bathrooms and the cafeteria don't have windows and this is where students are most likely to take off their masks.

"Even in classrooms the windows often don't work or are screwed shut. It was 94 degrees in my room today, that tells you how bad the ventilation is.

"Our schools will become superspreader events."

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Philadelphia Masterman High School

Teachers at Philadelphia Masterman High School worked from outside the building for two days before classes started, in order to protest the abysmal conditions within the school. Over 60 areas of damaged asbestos were found in classrooms and bathrooms. Asbestos dust is also reportedly collecting on ceiling tiles.

The teachers taking part in the protest were not paid for the two days and were ordered back into the classroom as the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers would not back their efforts.

Asbestos fibers can cause serious and deadly health risks. At least one Philadelphia teacher has recently died from asbestos exposure. Long forbidden in new construction, asbestos remains in many of the school district's century-old buildings and as it crumbles and deteriorates, the fibers become airborne.

The Philadelphia School Board has refused to release information about asbestos in buildings and other environmental risks.

Philadelphia Federation of Teachers

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers has been pushing for teachers to return to the classrooms despite the pandemic.

In a vaccine town hall held last week titled, "Let's get Philadelphia back in school to stay," union bureaucrats and medical officials argued that having masks and vaccinations for adults was enough to ensure children's safety.

When asked about young children who are not yet eligible for vaccinations, the officials argued that they should be safe if all the adults were vaccinated, but did not raise the danger of children passing the virus from one to the other.

Dr. William King, MD pediatrician and vice president of the Medical Society of Eastern Pennsylvania told the meeting about a party of 1,000 vaccinated people held in Massachusetts where some 30 people were hospitalized later with COVID and four died. However, he sought to minimize the danger of infection shown by this example by claiming that without vaccinations, over 300 people would have been hospitalized and 30 people would have died, implying that a death rate of 4 out of 1,000 is "acceptable."

Natalia Ortiz-Torrent, MD, Medical Director, Psychiatry, Temple University Hospital spoke about how important it was for children to go back to in-person learning for their psychological and emotional well-being. She responded to questions about keeping children in masks at school by stating that all a parent has to do is to explain to the children about the importance of wearing a mask at school and that it "should work."

Pittsburgh

Pennsylvania's second largest district, Pittsburgh, with 20,000 students, returned to all in-person learning on September 3. In some cases, parents watched as K-5 graders were paraded into schools with a marching band.

"I'm very worried," said the parent of a 5th grader. "They tell us it is safe and that they are taking all these precautions, yet this virus spreads and if one person is sick, many are going to get infected."

School officials had to postpone the reopening for a week as they were not able to hire enough bus drivers to transport the students.

Rather than increase pay and hire additional drivers, the district moved start times around to allow buses to make additional trips.

"It is just crazy," said one Pittsburgh driver. "You see how old our buses are, things are always breaking down. They don't even talk about distancing the kids. Kids don't stay in their seats, they want to talk with their friends.

"We are just going to be spreading the virus.

"One thing no one talks about is my kids. I have two daughters, what if I bring the virus home to them?"

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank and File Safety Committee is organizing teachers, parents and students independent of the unions and both the Democrats and Republicans. The committee is fighting for the complete closing of schools and all non-essential production until the pandemic is eradicated.

The committee meets every Thursday evening from 7:30 to 9:30 and invites educators, staff and parents to attend. For more information and to sign up for our newsletter please visit www.wsws.org/edsafety.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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