

Hundreds of COVID-19 cases reported in first week of school in Washington state

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Shattering the promises of Washington state politicians and teacher unions that schools could be reopened “safely” with haphazard mitigation measures and staff vaccination, the first week of fall semester resulted in hundreds of students testing positive and many more quarantining due to exposure.

Seattle Public Schools (SPS), the largest school district in Washington state, with about 52,000 students and 7,500 full-time staff members, reopened for full in-person instruction on September 1. Data published regularly by the district reveals that 51 positive cases were reported in the first week of school, consisting of only three days for most students. The following week, SPS reported 66 additional cases, bringing the start-of-the-year total to 117. Students constitute 86 percent of all cases, and staff make up 12 percent.

Data compiled by the *Seattle Times* on September 8 shows that eight other school districts in King County reported two or more cases. Northshore School District came third behind Seattle, with 48 total cases reported since August 1, and Federal Way School District came in first with 107 total cases since late August. However, the numbers likely arose from the first one-and-a-half weeks of school as all districts held their first day on September 1.

The Washington State Department of Health releases weekly outbreak reports each Wednesday. For the week of August 29, a total of 10 outbreaks were reported, defined as two or more linked cases in a shared location. A total of 358 outbreaks have occurred since the pandemic began. K-12 schools are the fifth-biggest source of outbreaks behind food service, childcare, retail and manufacturing.

However, the scale of infection is largely underreported due to the lack of a rapid testing and contact tracing program for all families and school staff, as well as with a lack of transparency from school officials.

Washington’s data adds to the overwhelming scientific evidence that reopening schools will result in a significant rise in new cases, especially among unvaccinated children. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, about 252,000 positive pediatric cases were added just this past week, the largest number of child cases in a week since the pandemic began, with children comprising 26.8 percent of reported weekly COVID-19 cases.

The situation has produced opposition among educators and parents. “I am very frustrated with the way the reopening is happening,” Michael, a math teacher in the Seattle region, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “All the data that I am seeing, from local reports and your website, tells me that it is not safe in Washington state right now.

“We have a lot of questions. Where are they going to put us? What’s the ventilation going to be like? Are we going to be able to maintain six-foot social distancing? Are students going to be wandering the hallways?”

“The uniform masking mandate, which is insufficient even if it was implemented perfectly, is not being enforced,” Michael explained, referencing photos published on social media by a school with an unmasked student standing close to a staff member.

Michael criticized the media narrative that Democratic Governor Jay Inslee is doing a great job leading Washington state through the pandemic. “We’re not Texas or Florida, so what is there to worry about? [But] even if we do not see the same numbers as in Mississippi right now, even half of that or a third of that would be horrific.”

Robert, an English as a Second Language (ESL) tutor from Olympia, said, “No, we don’t have the same circumstances as Florida, but we have a higher case rate and a lower vaccination rate than the national average. So, what are the grounds for saying Washington should be celebrating? The false confidence that is being promoted

throughout the society is kind of unbelievable.”

Although Governor Inslee imposed strict requirements for all education staff to be fully vaccinated, data has shown that vaccines aren't enough to stop community spread of COVID-19. Washington state has experienced well over 3,000 cases every day since August, reaching higher levels than the peak last winter, when most schools were teaching remotely.

Even in King County, where 65.5 percent of people 12 and over are fully vaccinated, cases and hospitalizations among children have been climbing, straining the hospital system. Dr. John McGuire, who works in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit at Seattle Children, told a local news outlet: “The people we are seeing in the hospital are typically people who are unvaccinated, either teens who are not vaccinated or younger people who are not eligible to be vaccinated. We are clearly in a fifth wave here in Washington.”

The Washington Educational Association (WEA) and local affiliate Seattle Education Association (SEA) have been fully on board with the plan to usher kids back into school. Repeatedly declaring their commitment to a non-existent “safe” in-person reopening, the unions are signing memoranda of understanding with the districts to implement their plans, just as they did in the springtime.

Local union affiliates have followed the lead of the Biden administration and national teacher unions in claiming, falsely, that schools can be opened safely so long as vaccination and mitigation measures like social distancing, masking, and ventilation improvements are in place, conditions that do not exist in the vast majority of public schools.

The SEA-SPS agreement is full of empty or vague phrases such as “universal and correct use of masks” and a three-foot “physical distance, to the extent possible.” The guidelines do not outline how maximum social distancing will be maintained in crowded hallways and lunchrooms. Testing will only be provided on-site when teachers or students exhibit symptoms, leaving asymptomatic cases undetected.

While the agreement sets certain guidelines for ventilation systems in every building and classroom, many teachers express fear that these promises will be broken as they were last year. Some teachers from the Seattle–Tacoma region are posting anonymous photos on social media of crowded classrooms, some with no windows.

The Democratic Party and trade unions are in reality pursuing a modified version of the “herd immunity”

policy of right-wing Republicans, accepting as inevitable the rampant spread of the virus throughout schools, workplaces and society as a whole and emphasizing the need to “live with the virus.”

Eradication of COVID-19 is possible with a rigorous public health strategy that is pursued with a combination of mitigation measures, short-term lockdowns and widespread vaccination. However, the ruling class considers these measures too costly to the profits.

Robert, the ESL tutor, explained: “The consequences of the virus to the population, including students, is abundantly well known by people who are making decisions about the school system. It's malicious, willful neglect to send kids back into schools, and they are not going to change course.

“The goal of every sector of society is to treat the coronavirus as just a little speedbump in the routine operation of capitalism. The only way that can be done is to sacrifice the working class, specifically with children being pushed back to schools and their parents back to workplaces.”

Educators, parents and the working class have the power to unite to stop the pandemic and protect children. Washington teachers and parents must come together to fight the ruling class that puts profits over lives, by building and expanding the network of independent rank-and-file safety committees, independent of and in opposition to the teachers' unions, to demand control over health and safety guidelines in their classrooms, the immediate closure of all schools, and the implementation of an eradication strategy to end the pandemic.

We encourage any educator, staff, parent or worker in the region who wants to join this struggle to contact us and attend the next meeting of the Pacific Northwest Educators Rank-and-File Committee this Sunday, September 19 at 12:00 p.m. PST.



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