

After 592 students and 384 staff test positive in first week of classes New York City mayor reduces quarantine protocols in schools

Sandy English
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On Monday, New York City's Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio unilaterally announced that unvaccinated children who are known to have been exposed to COVID-19 in classrooms will no longer be required to quarantine. Although the mayor said he would increase testing from once every other week to once weekly, still only an inadequate ten percent of all students will be tested and only those students whose parents sign a consent form.

These moves come just one week after schools reopened in the largest district in the US with roughly 1.1 million students. They will undoubtedly accelerate the spread of the highly contagious Delta variant of the virus, which is already surging through the city, among children and in their communities. Since July 7, the seven-day average of daily new cases in New York City has skyrocketed from 188 to 2,094, an eleven-fold increase.

Across the US, COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths among children have risen dramatically as a result of school reopenings. On Monday, the American Association of Pediatrics (AAP) announced that another 225,978 children were officially infected with COVID-19 last week and 20 more children died. Since July 1, a staggering 1.47 million children have been infected, 4,561 have been hospitalized and 145 have died.

Coinciding with de Blasio's announcement, the DOE posted a notice on its website Monday that read, "Beginning on Monday, September 27, we will no longer close an entire classroom when there is a positive case. Unvaccinated students who are wearing face coverings and have maintained at least three feet of distance from a student who tests positive will not be considered close contacts and will not have to quarantine." Previously, in an already dangerous practice, only vaccinated children did not have to quarantine.

In a statement, de Blasio told the media: "We saw enough quarantining that we thought this is something we want to get ahead of, and make sure that only those who really need to quarantine are quarantining."

The reduction of the quarantine protocols was widely denounced on social media by educators and parents who have

seen firsthand that a three-foot distance between children is impossible in most New York City schoolrooms.

One educator from Queens tweeted, "Friends, if this isn't reason for NYC parents and teachers to join together in a general strike, idk what is."

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT), which claims to represent New York City educators, tweeted, "We strongly disagree with the mayor's plan to limit the quarantine process to only some children." This is the most naked hypocrisy. The UFT has been a driver, and not simply a bystander, of reopening schools at every stage of the pandemic, even before vaccinations were available. It has suppressed every attempt by its members to organize sickouts or strikes, acting in lockstep with the Democratic Party establishment in New York in reopening schools in order to send parents back to work.

The UFT statement was met with disgust from educators, with one tweeting, "You guys only believe in your biweekly membership dues, nothing else. You don't do squat for us!" Another added, "If you care about our students or teachers, this policy won't be accepted. Are you even trying? Why does the mayor feel so comfortable unilaterally changing terms?"

The response of the UFT can only be understood as an effort at damage control designed to dampen opposition to school reopenings by educators and parents. The first week of classes in the city was a disaster. Already one school in East Harlem, PS 97, which provides instruction for special education students, has been closed by the city health department because of COVID-19 infections. With only 10 percent of students tested district-wide, already 592 have tested positive for the virus, while an additional 384 staff have tested positive.

Exact figures have not been released, but many parents have boycotted the reopening of schools by not sending their children back to school at all. For those that have returned, they have found that even the most basic mitigation measures promised by the DOE were a farce.

One middle-school teacher in Brooklyn described to the *World Socialist Web Site* what thousands of others are now experiencing, saying, "My classes are full. It's physically impossible for the students to be three feet apart. And that goes

for just about everybody in the building.”

She added, “PPE is a joke. I have 300 students. I’m just given this tiny thing of hand sanitizer and six masks for a month. I heard of other teachers who did not go get their PPE on the first day of work. When they went on the second day and told the administration, ‘Oh I missed my opportunity. I was busy in a meeting,’ they were told, ‘We’re out. Too bad.’ So they have absolutely nothing for the kids.

“The kids cannot keep their masks on, and I spend most of class period saying, ‘Pull your mask up. Your nose is showing.’ And that’s with the regular classes. With special ed classes the kids take their masks completely off and I have to spend the entire time convincing them to put them back on.”

Describing the unscientific testing policy adopted by the district, she said, “Today we found out that our school won’t get tested until this Friday. Who knows how many non-symptomatic kids we have in the building spreading COVID at this moment?”

The opening of New York City schools is the capstone in a ruling class program to send workers back to work and put their children in school across the US regardless of the consequences.

The nationwide reopening of schools has accelerated the sickness and death of both adults and children. The situation has been most catastrophic throughout the South, where thousands of outbreaks have taken place in schools across Florida, Texas, Alabama, Tennessee and throughout the region. Last week, the West Virginia Department of Education reported 90 outbreaks of COVID-19 in the state’s schools and over 750 confirmed COVID-19 cases among staff, faculty and students.

In Kentucky, school age children are getting infected in greater numbers than any other age group. Recently released statistics show that at least 33 school employees have died of COVID-19 in the state since 2020. At least 14 Tennessee public school staff have died from the disease since the school year started, and in Georgia, the figure is 35 faculty and staff. Two weeks ago, the Georgia Department of Public Health confirmed that 60 percent of all COVID outbreaks in the state occurred in K-12 schools.

These horrific figures, the product of the complete lifting of all mitigation measures in pursuit of “herd immunity,” will be reached at a more gradual pace in other parts of the US that have adopted limited mitigation measures such as mask-wearing.

The wave of infections in schools throughout the US has produced a national shortage of school bus drivers and a transportation crisis. In an August survey of trade associations for school bus transportation, 51 percent of respondents described a lack of drivers as “severe” or “desperate,” with 78 percent responding that the situation is worsening. In Massachusetts, the National Guard has been activated to drive buses. In New York, Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul has downgraded the requirements for obtaining the commercial

drivers licenses necessary to operate school buses.

One New York City school bus driver with over 20 years of experience remarked on the situation: “What kind of drivers will they be getting? They don’t really care. It seems nice what they say they are doing but they are just jerking people around. They try to get people who are retired but for \$17 an hour they can only get those who are desperate.”

In New York City, as across the US, opposition to in-person learning is enormous. Many educators and parents are calling for walkouts and strike action. In response, a wing of the Democratic Party and of the trade unions, including the UFT’s Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE) faction, have promoted a so-called “remote option” whereby parents would be able to choose individually to keep their children at home.

This individualist policy only applies to parents who can afford to stay at home with their children, while working class parents would be forced to send their children into schools under economic duress, exacerbated by the Biden administration’s cutoff of supplemental unemployment insurance earlier this month and the scrapping of the eviction moratorium.

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, in conjunction with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), has advocated a general strike to close all public schools and universities and implement high-quality remote education. The committee has raised the demand for financial support for parents who must stay home with their children.

What is necessary is a common fight to close all K-12 schools, universities and nonessential workplaces, in combination with a mass vaccination campaign, universal testing, contact tracing, isolation of infected patients and other public health measures, as part of a broader strategy to eradicate COVID-19 on a world scale. This strategy will not be implemented by the political establishment or the trade unions, but must be fought for by the working class itself organized in independent rank-and-file action committees.



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