

# Educators and parents must unite in Washington state to close the schools, end the pandemic, and save lives!

Washington Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee  
20 September 2021

*This statement was discussed and adopted at the inaugural meeting of the Washington Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee on Sunday. Contact us here to learn more about the work of the WERFSC or to get involved.*

At the start of September, K-12 schools fully reopened across the Pacific Northwest, facilitating the spread of COVID-19 throughout the population and putting children's lives at risk of serious illness and death. We are establishing the Washington Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to oppose these dangerous and unsafe reopenings throughout Washington, and we aim to be a rallying point for educators, parents and all workers throughout the region.

We are joining a broader global network of rank-and-file committees among educators, autoworkers, transit and logistics workers, and other sections of the working class internationally in demanding the closure of all schools as part of a scientifically based public health strategy to end the pandemic and save countless lives.

Data from just the past few weeks have exposed the lie promoted by both political parties and the teachers' unions that schools can be reopened "safely." Seattle Public Schools has already reported 213 COVID-19 cases, of which 86 percent are students and 12 percent are staff. As of this writing, the Federal Way School District has reported 129 cases since the start of the school year. Spokane reported 138, and Olympia reported 22. The Tri-cities region has been hardest hit, with hundreds of students and staff testing positive or quarantining every week.

Pediatric infections comprise a growing share of cases, as classrooms, childcare and youth sports opened to full capacity and without rigorous mitigation measures in place. Across Washington, the most recent data from the American Academy of Pediatrics reports that there are an estimated 840 new pediatric cases of COVID-19 each day. Ten percent of these cases have resulted in hospitalizations, and one ended in a recent death of a child at Seattle Children's Hospital.

Daily new cases in Washington stand at nearly 3,400 and daily deaths just below 40, reaching records even higher than last winter when most of the state's school districts were closed. Nationally, there are more than 150,000 new cases each

day, and more than 1,600 deaths, while globally there are an average of 538,000 reported cases per day and at least 8,700 deaths.

Keeping in mind the lack of testing and accurate reporting, these figures demonstrate that the pandemic is raging with no end in sight and that there is no scientifically grounded rationale to return to classrooms at present. Every politician at every level of government endorses in-person education without regard to the well-being of the same children they are endangering.

While the Republican Party pursues a brutal "herd immunity" strategy by dropping all safety measures to speed up the spread of the virus, the Democratic Party claims to provide a safe alternative with a "mitigation" strategy. They claim that certain measures such as masking, social distancing and vaccination requirements can slow down transmission and avoid overwhelming hospital systems, and over time create herd immunity through infections and vaccinations that will render COVID-19 an endemic virus like the seasonal flu. In reality, allowing the virus to spread will produce conditions for the potential evolution of more virulent strains of the virus and accepts the loss of human life that will inevitably arise.

The mitigation strategy lies behind the justifications that schools can be opened safely with safety measures implemented in schools. However, even in King County, which has one of the highest vaccination rates in the state, case rates have reached record levels and pediatric ICUs are experiencing severe strain from the influx of children.

Whatever level of mitigation measures are implemented, both parties are essentially pursuing a "herd immunity" strategy, encouraging the virus to spread indefinitely so that businesses and corporations can operate at full capacity. This policy aims to further enrich Wall Street and corporate executives at the expense of the lives of the working class, as kids are sent into unsafe classrooms so their parents can go back to dangerous workplaces. With unemployment aid cut off, parents are forced to fill low-wage job openings at Amazon fulfillment centers, restaurants, factories and food-packaging sites, and airports.

Every effort to write off even a single death of a student or

educator as “acceptable” or “inevitable” is atrocious and must be forcibly rejected. We insist that the life of every student and school employee is invaluable and nonnegotiable!

As such, the only acceptable solution to fight the COVID-19 pandemic is the complete eradication of the virus. Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz from the University of Calgary has designed models which show that in early 2020, public health measures implemented worldwide could have stopped coronavirus transmission in 37 days. With the more transmissible Delta variant, her models suggest that vaccines combined with a more aggressive public health strategy can halt the virus in roughly two months.

In contrast with the line promoted by the Democrats and the media, Dr. Gasperowicz and other scientists have stressed that vaccines alone are not enough to slow the Delta variant. Every public health measure must be utilized in tandem, including mass testing, contact tracing, isolation, mask wearing, and a mass vaccination campaign, as well as the closure of schools and nonessential businesses with full compensation for the workers and small business owners impacted.

Both the Democrats and Republicans are opposed to this strategy because it cuts across the profits of the financial elite. Any restrictions on economic activity are seen as completely unacceptable.

A particularly rotten role has been played by the unions, including the National Education Association (NEA) and their state-level counterpart, the Washington Education Association (WEA), as well as their local affiliates. They have repeatedly claimed that schools can be opened “safely” with proper “mitigation measures” in place, while negotiating agreements that abandon social distancing by keeping large class sizes intact, leave classrooms without proper ventilation, and prevent widespread testing and contact tracing.

The local unions, especially the Seattle Education Association (SEA), try to justify their support for unsafe reopenings by claiming that the lack of “equity” among “students of color” makes virtual learning disproportionately harmful for ethnic minorities. Such a perspective obscures the sharp class divide within public education in general, both in-person and online, and provides no alternative to ensure full funding for schools, high-quality instruction for all children, and material support to poor and working-class families.

With the unions and both big business parties defending unsafe school reopenings, workers must take the fight to end the pandemic into their own hands. Our rank-and-file committee is completely independent from the existing political establishment and the unions. We fight for what is necessary to save lives, not what is deemed acceptable to the powers-that-be.

In the interests of teachers, students and their communities, and drawing on the most advanced medical science, we issue the following core demands:

- For the immediate closure of all schools and the return to remote instruction until universal testing proves that

community transmission is reduced to zero for two consecutive weeks.

- Implementation of a broad public health program proven to halt the spread of the virus. This must include the shutdown of nonessential businesses, full compensation to families who are out of work due to necessary lockdowns, universal testing and contact tracing, the safe isolation of infected patients, public health education, rapid vaccine distribution, protective equipment and proper ventilation for essential businesses.

- High-quality virtual instruction for all students through free internet service and technology, teacher training for best online practices, and the hiring of more staff to facilitate small class sizes and 1-on-1 outreach to families.

- Where classes must be held in-person for children with severe special needs, or for children of parents working in essential industries, the strictest mitigation measures must be implemented and enforced. These include class sizes of no more than five students, installation of the highest-quality ventilation systems with MERV-13 filters, universal masking, daily testing of all students and staff, and more.

- Until the schools are closed, rank-and-file safety committees must exert direct control over health guidelines in schools and districts, such as universal mask wearing, ventilation, social distancing, outdoor lunchtime and the transparent reporting of all positive cases.

The funding for this public health and education program must be acquired from the ill-gotten fortunes of the corporate and financial elite which controls Washington politics. Washington is home to 21 billionaires, including the first and fourth richest men on the planet, Jeff Bezos of Amazon and Bill Gates of Microsoft. Just those two have a combined wealth of more than \$232 billion, wealth which has skyrocketed during the pandemic.

The only path forward for educators, parents and students is one of active struggle, based upon working-class unity, political independence and democratic rank-and-file organization. Join the Washington Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today and take up the fight to halt the reopening of schools, eradicate the pandemic and save lives.



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