

New York City Council meeting reveals massive cover-up of COVID-19 in schools

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On Thursday, the New York City Council's Education Committee held a public online oversight hearing, led by Brooklyn Democratic council member Mark Treyger, in order to quell the massive opposition to the full reopening of K-12 schools in the largest district in the United States, which began on September 13. The school year opened in the midst of a massive surge in positive COVID-19 infections nationwide, fueled by the spread of the highly infectious Delta variant.

The questioning of Department of Education (DOE) top functionaries underscored the coordinated effort by the entire administration of Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio to cover up the spread of coronavirus outbreaks in classrooms, obscure the political and scientific issues facing educators, parents, school staff, and students, and to promote in-person learning no matter the costs to human life and health.

The sordid event lasted just under five hours and featured a mixture of DOE and union bureaucrats, city officials, representatives of various parent organizations who advocated for a "remote option" of instruction for students, and sustained posturing by so-called critics on the City Council of the disaster of school reopening.

By design, the framework of the hearing excluded any discussion on serious measures for ending the pandemic and saving lives. Not one speaker suggested that schools should never have opened to begin with or that they should be closed to protect the lives of children, their families, and the community. On the contrary, the city council inquiry itself, led by a faction of the Democratic Party, reinforced the corporate propaganda that it is possible to safely open New York's poorly ventilated, crowded, and understaffed classrooms to over one million children, the majority of whom are unvaccinated.

Treyger, a Brooklyn Democrat who endlessly boasted of his credentials as a former DOE teacher and United Federation of Teachers (UFT) delegate, gave scripted and repetitious remarks to the high-ranking DOE officers and other city officials attending the hearing. He called attention to the fact that the department has withheld from the public official figures on its exact enrollment for the 2021-22 school year, as well as information on the total percentage of unvaccinated students within the system. Additionally, he exposed the DOE testing

and contact tracing regimen as completely fraudulent.

Finally, Treyger stressed that the three-foot social distancing rule recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines had been impossible to enforce, implicitly making the case that schools might be safe if only this issue were resolved.

Treyger stirred up a dust cloud of lying and evasion by the de Blasio administration. For example, as of October 5, the citywide, seven-day average total of positive tests per 100,000 individuals was 106.43. However, Dr. Torian Easterling, one of the medical officers for the city's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOH), touted the fact that this number fell within the CDC's designation of "substantial" community transmission, a decrease from levels in previous weeks. In actuality, this was an error. Although there has been a slight downward trend from a high on September 13, the current figures are still within the threshold of "high" community transmission.

In another bizarre twisting of reality, First Deputy Chancellor of the DOE, Donald Conyers, boasted of the DOE's widely opposed slashing of quarantine measures as being a boon to child educational welfare. In his opening remarks, he said, "[w]hen a positive COVID-19 case is confirmed in a classroom, we no longer automatically close that classroom provided everyone has remained masked and maintained three feet of distance from whomever tested positive. That change has ensured that our students are able to remain learning in-person safely."

At every point in the discourse, Conyers evaded direct questioning by deflecting and deferring to other officials. Several times, he flatly refused to give information on the DOE's enrollment number as well as the number of unvaccinated children currently in schools, assuring the meeting attendees that the department was "working on getting these numbers" at a later date. Treyger pointed out that as a former DOE employee, he believed it was unfathomable that this information would not be available. This is no doubt entirely true.

DOE Chief Administrative Officer Lauren Siciliano played the role of arch-bureaucrat, bolstering with high-sounding sophistry the testimony of DOE officials whose responses fell

flat in the investigations. Siciliano gives some insight into the social layer that is implementing the deadly school opening for hundreds of thousands of working class and middle class children. She was formerly the Vice President of the Strategic Investments Group of the New York City Economic Development Corporation, one of the major conduits between big real estate and city government, and her husband, John Conte, is a banking industry recruiter. Siciliano's father is Vice President of the information technology department at JP Morgan Chase.

Testimony from Dr. Ted Long, executive director of the city's COVID-19 Test & Trace Corps, admitted that the city's wholly inadequate testing program would not track breakthrough infections. To date, 3,137 students and 1,163 staff have officially tested positive since schools reopened, with both figures known to be vast under-counts.

Long stated, "[t]he CDC says that surveillance testing should be done on unvaccinated people, with the predominant reason being that...we do surveillance testing with the same 10 percent random sample, the same protocols at every school... so that we can look comparatively and see if we can detect a signal rising maybe in one school that wouldn't be in another school, too. If you add vaccinated people into to the mix, you're going to bias your sample because we know that fortunately, if you're vaccinated, you're less likely to get the virus and go to the hospital and to eventually die from the virus."

Treyger also pointed out that the policies had changed with regard to random testing of unvaccinated students. Whereas consent to testing was mandatory for all students in the 2020-21 school year, parents were now not required to sign a consent form. Conyers admitted that only 192,705 student testing consent forms were currently on file for this year, a fraction of the number of unvaccinated students in the entire school system.

At one point during the hearing, DOE and DOH officials admitted that there were only "over 100" full-time staff dedicated to case detection, contact tracing and school investigations. Considering that there are 1,876 schools in the entire DOE system, this leaves an average of approximately 0.05 health care specialists per school. Commissioner of the Department of Buildings, Melanie La Rocca, coldly reassured the session that "we believe we are sufficiently staffed."

Although city officials and council members unanimously praised the sharp increase in vaccination rates among DOE employees in response to de Blasio's vaccine mandate for DOE employees, the hearing gave platform to a contingent of anti-science and anti-vaccination spokespeople. Conflating life-saving science with the politics of individual choice, Brooklyn council member Inez Barron gave credence to right-wing and pseudo-scientific arguments that vaccines are harmful in comparison with the deadly coronavirus.

Toward the end of the meeting, the stage was handed to Christina Coscia, a former DOE teacher of 16 years who

allowed herself to be furloughed due to her opposition to being vaccinated. Coscia is a member of the right-wing Teachers for Choice group, which was involved in a recent federal lawsuit against vaccine mandates as well as right-wing, anti-vaccination protests throughout the city.

Equally duplicitous were the remarks made by UFT's millionaire president Michael Mulgrew, who had the audacity to complain about the DOE's inability to fill staffing shortages. Over the past decade, he has played a leading role in the ramming through of rotten concession after concession for rank-and-file education employees.

In the case of the pandemic, the UFT bureaucracy played the most active part in facilitating de Blasio's school reopening campaign since the fall of 2020. The UFT opposed vaccine mandates and has refused to defend the rights of its members to health and safety, including against the sharp decrease in accommodations for educators with pre-existing conditions.

Parents, educators and students must not be lulled by the efforts of the Democrats on the City Council to channel opposition into avenues which are acceptable to the school reopening agenda of the ruling class. They should instead fight for the complete eradication of COVID-19 and join the New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

At its October 3 meeting, the committee commissioned a statement to shut schools as part of a global strategy to put an end to the pandemic. These demands stand in sharp contrast to the city's administration and the labor bureaucracy's thinly veiled cover for "herd immunity" policies.

We urge all New York City teachers, students, parents, and staff to attend the next committee meeting on Saturday, October 16, at 3:30 p.m. Eastern. [Click here to register for the event.](#)

We also urge all those interested in joining the fight to eradicate the pandemic and save lives to register for the WSWs's global online event, "How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication," which will take place on Sunday, October 24, at 1 p.m. Eastern.



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