

“My life means nothing to the powers that be. My students’ lives mean nothing.”

Letter from a Brooklyn teacher on the conditions in New York City schools

New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
10 November 2021

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was founded in August 2020 to fight for the health and safety of educators and students during the pandemic. Our committee has sought to organize teachers independently of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and other “unions” and promote a policy of school closing and support for parents that will enable them to keep their children home while other measures to eliminate COVID-19 are implemented. Sign up today to get involved!

One committee member, a middle-school teacher in Brooklyn, has written the following letter to describe the conditions in her school. Her name has been withheld to prevent victimization.

I am a teacher at a public middle school in Brooklyn. I see firsthand how deplorable the current conditions are in New York City schools. I have gone from being a teacher to being a “frontline worker.” In September, when school started, our Mayor, Bill DeBlasio, declared that public schools were “Safe, Clean, Ready!” He lied on all three counts.

First of all, the school was filthy. The only thing cleaned in my classroom was the floors. Everything was untouched since the schools closed down a year and a half ago. Dirt and grime covered every surface. Nothing was cleaned or sanitized.

As for “Ready and Safe,” before school opened teachers were given PPE to last for 30 days. We had to sign for them to make sure we weren’t taking more than our allotted share. We were each given an eight-ounce bottle of hand sanitizer, 10 paper masks, a 16-ounce container of “surface sanitizing wipes,” and a pack of latex gloves. I have approximately 300 students in my class per week. All these supplies quickly ran out.

The UFT cheerfully informed us that we could use our Teachers Choice Funds to buy PPE (Teachers Choice monies are given to us to buy extra supplies of our own choosing, beyond our basic supplies). With 300 students, there is no way that amount of PPE can be considered adequate by anyone’s standards. Nearly eight weeks have come and gone, and I have not received any more PPE.

My class sizes are the same as pre-COVID. They are overcrowded. Every seat is full, and students sit shoulder to shoulder. We have empty classrooms we could use but the principal has not received funds to hire more teachers or substitutes which would easily help to reduce class sizes. As they sit, the students do not keep their masks on. I spend the entire class period reminding them to keep their masks on and to keep their noses covered.

The ventilation in my classroom is very, very minimal. Supposedly, all schools have been inspected for proper ventilation. I have two small air purifiers (a very inefficient brand) and three out of six windows open about three inches.

I have learned by watching online events such as “How to end the pandemic,” sponsored by the *World Socialist Web Site*, that the science tells us ventilation is a key factor when it comes to stopping the spread of COVID while indoors. Dr. Jose-Luis Jimenez, a professor of Chemistry at the University of Colorado, an expert on aerosols, explained how the science shows us that this is how the virus is spread—by aerosols. True proper ventilation systems help stop the spread. A window cracked open a few inches and a small air purifier is NOT a ventilation system and certainly not for a classroom full of unvaccinated children.

The crowded hallways have absolutely no ventilation, either. As they pass their friends in other classes, students pull their masks down to yell greetings, in spite of teachers’ constant reminders. In the cafeteria, they remove their masks to eat as they once again sit shoulder to shoulder. When I have complained about the inability to keep students three feet apart, I was told the Department of Education (DOE) instructions are “Three feet when possible.” It’s NEVER possible.

There have been positive cases of COVID among the students. The only notification we get is a form letter by email. It states there is a “Suspected Case of Covid in our School.” No other details. We aren’t notified when classes are sent home to quarantine.

I literally wait in my classroom for my next class to show up.

When they fail to show, I know they are quarantined. The second week of school, I had two classes that went missing. Nobody told me they were gone or that there were positive COVID cases. Classes just disappear and no announcements are made. They are just gone.

When I approach an administrator and ask, the response is always vague or purposely obtuse. I don't ask about individual students, only classes. I just want to know if I have been exposed to the virus to make a decision about being tested. I approached the union representative about how I am not being informed about the positive COVID cases. She told me, "Did you get the email? Then you have been informed."

Students and parents are not informed either, only the parents of the quarantined. Everyone else is kept in the dark. If I were a parent, I would want to know. The families in my district tend to have multigenerational households. No one is being informed. No one is being protected.

In response to the failure of communication regarding COVID cases in my school, I have started a group chat with my colleagues. We all share information with one another. If one of us hears about a positive case in the school, or a quarantined class, we can share the news with one another immediately. In this small way, we have taken a big step toward coming together as colleagues and looking out for each other. It eases the feeling of helplessness. We can take steps to protect ourselves. There is power in us coming together. I highly recommend it to all teachers. Take the initiative. Get the numbers of as many staff members as possible and create a group chat. Share information. Look out for one another. No one else is looking out for us. The next logical step is to connect with other schools and their staff. We need to join forces.

We all feel totally abandoned by the union. UFT President Michael Mulgrew should have called for a strike as soon as the union was not allowed into the discussion on the teacher vaccination mandate. He should have called for a strike as soon as he knew the students would not have mandated testing or vaccinations.

At the October 6, City Council meeting, I watched as Mark Trayger grilled the DOE (New York City Department of Education) for numbers on COVID testing, social distancing, lack of staff and parental notification of positive cases. They refused to answer his questions. They stonewalled every attempt for facts because it is obvious that they have failed students, teachers, parents in every way. The stonewalling was the evidence that there are currently no true mitigations happening in city schools. So why didn't Mulgrew and Trayger call for the immediate shutdown of schools? It was all political theater and not about the safety of our kids, teachers, and families.

The DOE claims that they are doing weekly randomized testing of 10 percent of the school population. In my school, the same 10 students (whose parents have filled out consent forms)

are called down every week. The school has approximately 300 students. You do the math. They are not testing 10 percent and it is not randomized if it is the same group of students. Another lie.

Teachers and staff are refused testing. The administration claims it is because we are vaccinated. Yet, vaccinated people are getting breakthrough infections and spreading infections every day. This is all about keeping the reported numbers down.

Many of my colleagues have disappeared as well. I hear rumors like, this one didn't want to be vaccinated or that one took early retirement. It's all very hush, hush. Nobody knows for sure. Nobody wants to be overheard talking about it. Much like my classes, they are just gone. They just disappear.

Every day I go to work knowing that I will be spending my day teaching in classrooms with little ventilation, packed full of unvaccinated students who won't keep their masks on. I am at high risk because of a health condition.

I worry about getting sick or spreading COVID to others. I worry about the students. Kids are dying from this thing. I worry about the families and how parents think their kids are safe in school, but they are not.

The corporate media and the politicians are spreading the lie that it safe to get back to work. They are creating this false narrative that the pandemic is over. They want to get us back to work to feed the wealth of the big corporations. They want to save the economy not lives. My life means nothing to the powers that be. My students' lives mean nothing. It's all about the economy and corporate gains. Our lives are dispensable.

Meanwhile, the scientists (true scientists, not those in the pockets of politicians) are struggling to get the truth out to the public. ELIMINATION strategies are the only way to end the pandemic. Yet, these scientists are not invited to speak by the corporate media.

Please look at the videos and webinars on the *World Socialist Web Site* that feature these highly respected international scientists who attest to the fact that we are still very much in a pandemic. See the facts and decide for yourself about who is telling truths and who is spreading falsehoods.



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