

Philadelphia teachers demand switch to virtual learning as COVID-19 cases skyrocket

Samuel Davidson
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On Tuesday, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) was forced to close 92 schools, switching to virtual instruction for the rest of the week due to COVID-19 outbreaks that have caused massive staff shortages. In Pittsburgh, the school district has been forced to close 26 schools this week.

More than 1,000 teachers in Philadelphia have either become infected with COVID-19 or have been exposed to someone who is infected and must self-isolate. Since the start of the year, the district has been short more than 2,000 teachers and other staff members as many have left the profession and positions remain unfilled.

Despite the mass levels of infection, Philadelphia's health secretary, appointed by Democratic Mayor Jim Kenney, continues to call for schools to remain in-person. On Wednesday, Dr. Cheryl Bettigole said that there was no evidence throughout the pandemic that school closures decrease transmission.

Echoing lies used by politicians to force open schools, she falsely claimed, "When we do see cases in schools, the majority of those cases are not coming from in-school transmission. They are coming from at-home settings, from activities outside of school."

Amid growing demands by Philadelphia teachers for a shift to virtual learning, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) reiterated that it is committed to working out a plan to continue in-person learning despite the explosion of COVID-19 cases in the city and throughout the region.

Demonstrating its role in seeking to keep schools open in the face of the pandemic, the PFT merely criticized the school board for not accepting the union's proposal for a seven-day pause to give them time to convince their members to return to unsafe buildings.

In a Facebook and Twitter post, the PFT wrote, "Instead of heeding our call for a 7-day pause on in-person learning to effectively plan for adequate mitigation measures, the District is undertaking a piecemeal plan that leaves parents and staff alike scrambling to make plans for tomorrow morning."

Union leader Jerry Jordan offered his support to develop a plan to reopen schools, saying, "The entire school system should not have opened for children and staff until the district and the union is able to assess the school buildings and to make sure that the buildings are safe for children and for staff."

On Wednesday, Jordan continued to defend the PFT's proposal for a seven-day pause while working out a "safety plan."

The position of the PFT, along with its parent union the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), is that schools can be opened safely with various mitigation measures. In reality, the mitigation measures never went into effect, and the few measures taken last spring were mostly dropped in the fall. During both semesters, large numbers of children and staff were infected each week.

Jordan is hoping that by getting the SDP to make a few cosmetic changes, such as renewing the mask mandate or weekly testing of 10 percent of the students and staff, he can force teachers into the classrooms.

"They still have not demanded a switch to virtual learning," responded a Philadelphia teacher and supporter of the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

He added, "It is clear that it is not at all safe to be in school. Look at how many teachers are out sick. We are repeating the same crisis. A week's pause is not going to get it done. The buildings are a hotbed of infections. The union said it would be safe last year, but there were no N-95 masks, no real testing, nothing that would really make a difference.

"If teachers and students go back into school, people are going to get sick and some more may die."

Amid the rapid spread of the Omicron variant, Philadelphia is now reporting more than 3,200 daily new cases, a staggering 315 percent increase in just the past 14 days. Neighboring counties of Delaware, Montgomery and Bucks have seen their case counts climb 342 percent, 240 percent and 177 percent, respectively.

Allegheny County, with Pittsburgh as its major city, has seen a similar spike in cases. The daily average of new cases has skyrocketed to more than 2,300 new infections, a jump of 290 percent in the past 14 days.

Across Pennsylvania, there were nearly 22,000 new cases on January 4, with the seven-day average running at more than 21,000. Both numbers are more than twice the previous peak in December 2020, despite the fact that more than 60 percent of the population are fully vaccinated. Hospitalizations are also up by 20 percent throughout the state and by 55 percent in Philadelphia.

Despite these catastrophic numbers and their impact on the life and health of teachers, staff, students and their communities, the PFT refuses to budge from its commitment to push educators into the classrooms.

Last spring, Jordan and the PFT played an instrumental role in forcing the reopening of schools. Faced with opposition from teachers, the union organized a phased reopening in which so-called experts were brought in, certifying that schools were “safe.” In this way, they opened roughly 50 schools per week until the entire district was back to in-person learning. Teachers reported that no serious safety measures were taken a year ago, and when schools reopened this past fall all measures were dropped.

Another Philadelphia teacher and member of the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee commented on the present crisis, “90 schools have closed for a reason, you can’t have just a few cosmetic changes. A few tweaks. We have to have virtual until it is safe.” He added, “The union did this last spring and they are trying to do it again. The powers that be are not going to shut it down. We are in a long protracted period of crisis.”

On December 13, 17-year-old Alayna Thach, who was a senior at Olney Charter High School, tragically died after having COVID-19 for a week. Teachers at her high school in North Philadelphia had been battling with the administration to take more safety measures and had requested a return to virtual learning, but their requests went unheeded.

Even after Alayna’s death, the school only switched to virtual learning after the teachers organized a petition, protest and sick-out.

The virus continues to take its toll on educators and students across the state. On January 2, Brittany Lauderback, a teacher’s aide at Colonial Elementary School in Montgomery County, died from COVID-19. She was just 33 years old and worked with 4th and 5th graders.

The deadly surge that has hit Pennsylvania and the rest of the US will only be exacerbated by the murderous policy of lifting restrictions and forcing the reopening of schools, which have been promoted by the Biden administration and Pennsylvania’s Democratic Governor Tom Wolf, with the

full support of the AFT and its local affiliates.

A teacher commented to the WSWs, “I keep having regular panic attacks thinking about going to school. I have an infant daughter and I can’t leave her without a father. I am so terrified now that I want to stop going to school. Why is this even happening?”

Overall, fewer than one quarter of Philadelphia’s eligible children ages 5–11 have received the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. The numbers are even worse for African American and Hispanic populations, which make up the bulk of the PSD population. Only 8 percent of Philadelphia’s African American children ages 5 to 11 have received at least one dose, and just 12 percent of Hispanic children.

After the PFT announcement that it only favored a one-week pause, teachers began expressing their outrage over being forced to go back into the buildings.

One teacher wrote, “Oh please!!! The PFT should have been demanding that the staff do not go back to unsafe conditions. They are part of the problem, PFT does not care about students or staff.”

Another teacher wrote, “We had so many staff absent and HALF of my 27 students didn’t show up. The parents are trying to tell you they don’t trust the decision making being made. Now I have to find time to teach any lessons this week due to absences, absences that will ultimately be tied to my rating and that of my school. What kind of sense does this make?”

Teachers must draw the lessons of the past two years and place no faith in the AFT or PFT. These organizations do not represent teachers but act as a police force against the working class.

Since fall 2020, the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has been organizing educators throughout the state and region to fight on the basis of the needs of educators, students and their communities, in opposition to the homicidal pandemic policies that represent the interests of the rich. For more information about joining this fight, e-mail the committee at paedrankandfile@gmail.com, text (412) 336-8245 or visit this page.



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