# Virginia governor Glenn Youngkin removes last remaining pandemic safety measures, declares state “open for business”

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Newly inaugurated governor Glenn Youngkin wasted no time in attacking Virginia’s schools and hospitals earlier this month when he signed a slate of executive orders that contradicted Virginia law on his first day in office. Youngkin has eliminated the last remaining employee, student and patient COVID-19 protections, while also making Virginia the latest Republican-led state to begin the process of banning “divisive concepts” in the classroom.

Executive Order 6 (EO6), which Youngkin says fulfills his promise to “declare Virginia open for business,” represents the thrust of the orders. Per the governor’s office, EO6 “Reinvigorates Job Growth by Removing Burdensome Regulations from Virginia’s Business Community,” a euphemistic way to introduce the removal of workplace safety mandates related to the pandemic. The order hinges on the unsubstantiated claim that present standards are “not having a measurable impact on preventing the spread of COVID-19.” EO6 directs the state health board to convene an “emergency meeting” to determine which protections can be slashed. Virginia being “open for business,” the governor argues, necessarily involves endangering the working class, and with all possible haste.

Executive Order 2 (EO2), which effectively ends mask mandates in schools, takes this same logic into the classroom. Youngkin repeats the lie that Omicron is less severe in children and concludes that since the cloth masks worn by most children are “ineffective,” no masks whatsoever should be required. Youngkin also wants to stop life-saving distance learning procedures. In guidelines for his executive orders released on January 21, his office affirms, “Schools must be open five days a week for in-person learning.”

EO2 has been challenged by multiple school districts and faces a lawsuit from Chesapeake teachers and parents, some of whom are immunocompromised. According to their attorney, the order clearly violates last year’s law SB1303 which prohibits any school from having fewer protection measures than Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidlines.

Underscoring the fascistic character of Youngkin’s executive orders, the new governor intends to enforce his proposed bans on pandemic precautions and “divisive concepts” in classrooms through the formation of a tip line. He has invited parents to send their concerns about violations—such as the continued enforcement of mask mandates or teaching historical subjects his administration considers inappropriate for students—directly to a government email address set up by his administration. Youngkin says his administration will “catalog it all.”

Youngkin’s orders fall on a Virginia still reeling from the homicidal pandemic policies pursued by the out-going administration of Democratic governor Ralph Northam. Parents report their districts have made no effort to keep them informed of in-school infections this school year. As one Norfolk parent put it to the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Virginia Beach Public Schools didn’t communicate much either, but at least they sent weekly updates. Since we switched to Norfolk, we haven’t heard anything at all.” No families interviewed in the Hampton Roads area have been notified this year regarding the present infection crisis. Screening programs remain “in development” everywhere in the state. Meanwhile, districts in Hampton Roads have reported positivity rates over 50 percent, with many reporting rates above 40 percent every day for almost a month.

At the beginning of the school year, districts received small numbers of BinaxNOW rapid tests for students to take home. After this initial test distribution, the Virginia

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Department of Health (VDH) has been unable to provide schools with a timetable for replenishment. Per local news station WVEC's reporting, Portsmouth Public Schools (a district with over 13,000 students) stated they have received 1,584 tests for the entire 2021-22 school year. Nearby Suffolk schools received enough tests for about 5 percent of their students. Schools in Hampton Roads, which are displaying their test positivity, report infection rates above 30 percent, and most have reported these high levels since the beginning of the year.

Another Norfolk Public School parent relates to the WSWS, "I have a kindergartner in NPS. I kept her home the week after New Year's because Omicron was raging in the city, with a 50 percent test positivity rate. I have my daughter back in now only because I don't want her to be disenrolled for missing more than seven days. The school has more positive cases for students and teachers every day." The parent went on to say, "I am so worried about COVID that I take my daughter out for lunch in the parking lot daily so she doesn't have to sit in the cafeteria without a mask. Every day I see that cafeteria, I see a super-spreader event in real time. Eventually, every child in there will have COVID, every single one. The staff shortages are wreaking havoc … wearing a mask means cloth or a surgical mask, i.e., something that does no good at all. The parents I know plan to demand a virtual option because this is dangerous and no one is learning a damned thing."

An increasing number of families are recognizing claims that Omicron is "mild" and a path to "herd immunity" for the unscientific declarations they are. Regional pediatric systems like Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters have been overwhelmed since the beginning of the year, as many parents found out on January 3 from a text message informing them that the area's pediatric emergency rooms and urgent care facilities were full.

Health care workers are notoriously overworked, but Youngkin signed Executive Order 11 to "give healthcare providers flexibility and support to battle staffing shortages caused by the COVID-19." Said "flexibility" refers to the "freedom" of workers to be subjected to increased exploitation.

The order empowers the VDH to "waive any state regulation" and enter into contracts "without regard to normal procedure," ostensibly in response to staffing shortages. Hospitals and nursing homes can add beds and disregard staffing ratios as the health department sees fit. The order eliminates the testing requirement for admission to nursing homes and exempts staff from requiring practice agreements to prescribe medication. Pharmacists can now be expected to supervise more technicians, and technicians engaged in Covid tasks no longer count toward this ratio, spreading them even thinner.

The disastrous policies implemented by the Youngkin administration leave working families with an impossible choice: expose their children to rampant infection and lasting disability or lose their homes and livelihood to poverty in order to provide childcare. This dilemma is the outcome of deliberate policies designed to keep kids in school and parents at work, so that business can go on as usual, even as the pandemic rages on, killing an average of 2,500 people every day in the US.

Workers have had two years to see their underpaid and deadly labor enrich the wealthiest members of society to record heights while simultaneously watching their own life expectancy decline as deaths mount ever higher. Only an elimination strategy led by the working class has any chance of protecting the population and ending the pandemic.

While teacher-led strikes and student walkouts unfold across the US and internationally, the unions and the corporate press work to isolate and silence their struggle for online learning and safe working conditions. Workers must take their safety into their own hands. The *World Socialist Web Site* has been working with teachers around the world to establish Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, where teachers and parents can join the fight to defend public education. The Southern Educators Rank-and-File Committee comprises an area from Texas to Virginia, and invites any interested teachers or parents from the area to contact the WSWS today.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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