

Democratic governors in the US northeast dropping school mask mandates

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New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy announced Monday that he will lift the mask mandate for schools and day care facilities March 7, the first Democratic governor in the northeast to do so.

“This is a huge step back to normalcy for our kids,” Murphy said. He did not give an estimate of the number of students, teachers and school workers for whom this will be a step into the hospital, or even the grave.

New Jersey has been one of the states hardest hit by the pandemic and for at least the first year had the highest rate of death. It presently stands third, at 3,601 deaths per million people, behind only Mississippi and Arizona. An average of 78 people a day died of COVID-19 last week in the state.

“We can responsibly take this step given the continuing drop in new cases and hospitalizations from Omicron and all the evidence projecting a continued decline over the coming weeks,” Murphy said. He also suggested that the “growth in vaccinations” was an additional reason for lifting the mandate, but relatively few New Jersey children are fully vaccinated.

According to published estimates, only one in four children between 5 and 11 years old has been fully vaccinated since COVID shots for that age group became available three months ago. There is no vaccine for children under 5, most of those at day care centers, but Murphy has lifted the mask requirement there as well.

Murphy, a multimillionaire former investment banker at Goldman Sachs, is responding to the demands of Wall Street, which wants COVID mitigation measures that hamper business profit-making scrapped. He is also under political pressure from the Republican right, which made significant gains in the statewide elections last November with a demagogic campaign focusing on mask and vaccine mandates. Murphy himself barely

won reelection.

Like President Joe Biden and other Democrats, Murphy accepts the fundamental premise of the right-wing campaign, that parents have the “right” to allow their children to become infected with a potentially deadly virus, and to help spread it to others by sending them unmasked and unvaccinated into crowded classrooms.

Leaders of the state’s largest teachers’ union, the New Jersey Education Association, supported Murphy’s action, issuing a statement saying, “We are cautiously optimistic that the current statewide school mask mandate can be safely relaxed in the near future, assuming current trends continue.” The union has consistently put the interests of the Democratic Party and the capitalist system above the lives and health of its own members.

Similar announcements followed from the governors of Delaware and Connecticut, also Democrats. Governor John Carney of Delaware, Biden’s home state, said that masks will no longer be required in indoor public settings starting this Friday, February 11, while the school mask mandate will be lifted on March 31.

In Connecticut, Governor Ned Lamont said the mask mandate for schools and day care centers will end on February 28. “I think this is something we’ve earned, Connecticut,” he said. After that day, “Each and every mayor, each and every superintendent can make that call themselves.”

Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker, a Republican, strongly hinted at a February 28 end day for all indoor mandates. His state already allows school districts to drop mask mandates if 80 percent of students and staff are vaccinated.

The school mask mandate in New York state is

scheduled to expire on February 21, and Governor Kathy Hochul said she was meeting Tuesday with superintendents to discuss data on infections and hospitalizations. “I am optimistic that we’re trending in that direction,” she said Monday, referring to a decision not to seek an extension of the mask mandate, “but I still need the time.”

New Jersey Governor Murphy is not just speaking for the Democratic Party in his state. He is the vice chairman of the National Governors Association, and headed the Democratic contingent at a meeting last week in Washington D.C. with President Biden. At a press briefing after that meeting, he said, “the general consensus is we’re on the road from a pandemic to an endemic.” He cited “overwhelming sentiment on both sides of the aisle” for the lifting of all COVID-related restrictions.

Most Democratic governors are following Murphy’s example, not just in the northeast, but nationwide. Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf, a Democrat, lifted mask mandates in his state last month, and California Governor Gavin Newsom has said he is considering an end date in his own state. Only a handful of western states, including Washington, Oregon, Nevada and New Mexico still have school mask mandates of indefinite duration.

The American Academy of Pediatrics said Monday, in response to the wave of actions that endanger the health and lives of millions of schoolchildren, that its guidance recommending masking for all students in elementary and secondary education remained unchanged.

Reports of the governors’ actions in the corporate media were generally uncritical, even laudatory. One of the most revealing statements came in the *Washington Post* report on New Jersey, which declared: “The shift in state policies comes as the national consensus shifts away from the need to protect Americans from the virus and toward a sense that the coronavirus is something people will need to learn to manage for a long time to come. Still, polling shows public support for masks in schools, so officials suggest districts should move cautiously.”

After referring to a “national consensus” for the shift away from any protective measures, the *Post* admits in the next breath that there is popular support for masking in schools. So who makes up the “national

consensus”? It is clearly a consensus within the ruling class, the corporate, political and media establishment. The admission is remarkable.

Corporate America is demanding an end to any form of mitigation that impacts on profits, including mask mandates, school closures, and, of course, any form of lockdown or economic restriction. This demand is channeled through the two corporate-controlled parties, in the bipartisan “consensus” to which both Governor Murphy and the *Washington Post* referred. The result is the imposition of policies that will extend and deepen the horrific impact of the pandemic, and produce a swelling of opposition from working people.



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