

AFT President Randi Weingarten calls for “off-ramp” to end mask mandates in schools

Harvey Simpkins
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On Tuesday, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten indicated her support for ending mask mandates for K-12 schools in the small minority of states where they still exist. Weingarten’s only disagreement with the far-right proponents of the immediate removal of all school masking is her call for the fig leaf of a “science-based metric” by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to justify this unscientific policy.

Appearing on MSNBC Tuesday morning, Weingarten repeatedly called for an “off-ramp” from masking in schools and explained that last November she asked CDC Director Rochelle Walensky and Education Secretary Miguel Cardona to start planning for this. She added, “I’m just asking the CDC to actually weigh in here so that we have that kind of guidance around the country.”

Touting Monday’s decision by New Jersey’s Democratic Governor Phil Murphy to end mask mandates in schools, Weingarten cited the “four or five different factors” the governor supposedly relied on to end the mandate there, effective March 7. New Jersey is one of several Democratic-led states to announce the end of mask mandates this week, including Connecticut, Delaware and Oregon.

Weingarten’s MSNBC appearance was part and parcel of the coordinated ruling class effort to end one of the few public health measures still in place to slow the spread of COVID-19. She appeared Tuesday along with Dr. Lucy McBride, a favored guest and contributor to various bourgeois media outlets due to her call for ending all pandemic restrictions.

In December, Weingarten tried to invite McBride to an AFT-sponsored town hall on the pandemic days before it was scheduled. The event was canceled after many long-scheduled speakers, including Dr. Jorge Caballero, reported being harassed by white supremacists, who were emboldened by Weingarten’s decision to invite McBride

to join the panel.

In Tuesday’s segment, McBride responded, “I think Randi’s exactly right, that as conditions evolve, policies should evolve as well and that we need to root our policies in evidence... There’s no convincing evidence in the real world that masking children in schools makes a significant difference in transmission in schools.”

McBride went on to tout a vaccine-only approach, adding, “It’s really time to start lifting mitigations whose benefits are unclear at best and whose harms are mounting.”

Agreeing with most of McBride’s unscientific claims, Weingarten replied, “This is the only place I disagree with Lucy: there’s a lot of evidence that the masks have helped stop transmission. But I agree with Lucy that ... it is impeding learning [and] socialization to have them.”

For most of the pandemic, “experts” like McBride have pushed the narrative that remote learning was the cause of learning loss, a lack of socialization and a mental health crisis in youth. Now that the Democrats and unions have fully reopened schools, McBride and similar well-paid peddlers of pseudoscience have shifted the cause of learning loss, decreased mental health and lack of socialization to masks.

Neither McBride nor Weingarten cited any evidence that masks are an impediment to learning or socialization, because no such evidence exists. They also ignored the reality that 200,000 American children have lost a parent or primary caregiver to COVID-19, causing a mental health crisis orders of magnitude greater than the impacts of school closures.

As for Weingarten’s reliance on the CDC to issue guidance for when to end the use of masks in schools, the agency has lost significant scientific credibility under the Biden administration and his appointed director, Dr. Rochelle Walensky.

Last February, just weeks into Biden’s presidency, the

CDC issued guidance stating, “At any level of community transmission, all schools have options to provide in-person instruction (either full or hybrid), through strict adherence to mitigation strategies.” At the time, Weingarten described the CDC’s new guidelines as “informed,” “rigorous” and “free from political meddling.” Thousands of school personnel have lost their lives in the year since these unscientific guidelines were issued, primarily due to in-person instruction.

On May 13, 2021, the CDC announced that vaccinated individuals no longer needed to wear masks indoors or socially distance. Walensky declared at the time, “Anyone who is fully vaccinated can participate in indoor and outdoor activities, large or small, without wearing a mask or physical distancing.” Within a day, many of the largest retailers dropped mask mandates and over the coming weeks almost every state ended their mask mandates as well.

That CDC guidance was not supported by the vast majority of epidemiologists. In a survey conducted by the *New York Times* at the time, “80 percent said they thought Americans would need to wear masks in public indoor places for at least another year. Just five percent said people would no longer need to wear masks indoors by this summer.”

In July, foreshadowing Weingarten’s current call for the CDC to issue guidance for ending mask mandates, the CDC issued guidance that vaccinated teachers and students did not need to wear masks inside schools.

Most notoriously, in late December, in response to large labor shortages caused by workers being exposed to the rapidly spreading Omicron variant, the CDC reduced their recommended quarantine time for exposed or infected individuals from ten to five days. The unscientific reduction in the quarantine period came in direct response to lobbying by the airline industry, which faced thousands of flight cancellations over the heavily traveled holiday period.

The CDC has applied the same revised quarantine guidelines to schools. Infected and exposed students and staff can return to classrooms after five days as long as they remain asymptomatic. The CDC further advises that “schools may consider forgoing quarantine for students ages 12–17 years who completed their primary vaccine series but have not yet received all eligible boosters.”

Given the CDC’s well-documented recent history of ignoring science in service to capitalism, Weingarten’s call for new CDC guidance on the removal of mask mandates in schools amounts to little more than a plea for

the ruling class to provide political cover to the unions as they facilitate the latest betrayal of the health interests of workers.

Weingarten has played a central role in selling the ruling class’s pandemic policies to hesitant teachers, parents and students, especially since Biden was elected. Last May, she told the *New York Times* that she was spending upwards of 15 hours a day on phone calls with the White House, the CDC and local union officials to facilitate school reopenings.

At the end of September, Weingarten and the AFT hosted an online town hall with the far-right parents group Open Schools USA, which not only opposes mask mandates but vaccine recommendations as well. The panel included four scientists, including Jay Bhattacharya, co-author of the Great Barrington Declaration (GBD), which calls for “herd immunity” through the infection of all young people.

Weingarten’s endorsement of a pseudo-scientific cover for the ending of mask mandates in schools is yet another deadly betrayal by the trade unions which have allowed the pandemic to rip through schools and workplaces.

Teachers who wish to fight against the abandonment of all public health measures in schools should join the Educators Rank and File Safety Committee today. This Committee is organizing parents, students and teachers in the United States and around the world committed to putting an end to the pandemic through a Zero COVID strategy utilizing all public health measures, including the temporary closure of all schools and non-essential businesses with full income protection for affected workers and full funding for remote learning.



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