

San Mateo County Community College District students and faculty speak out against unsafe return to campus

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25 February 2022

Students and faculty at the San Mateo County Community College District (SMCCCD) spoke out late last month against administrators' decision, with the complicity of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), to resume in-person instruction. Classes have been fully virtual since March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic initially erupted in the state.

The SMCCCD's decision to carry on with its plans to resume in-person classes—made well in advance during the previous semester—was announced a week prior to the first day of school amid the county's highest COVID-19 wave, which reached an average 7-day case rate of 2,104 and daily total of 5,949 new infections. In an email sent to its 31,000 students, the district stated that while vaccinations and masking are mandated for any attending campus, it will not impose social distancing requirements, in accordance with county and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations. In some cases, remote options are available, but for many classes students have been forced to choose between delaying their education or accepting a high risk of exposure to COVID-19.

On January 26, the SMCCCD Board of Trustees held a public meeting in an attempt to manufacture a sense of excitement for the return of students and faculty to dangerous campus facilities. During the meeting, each of the district's campus presidents was given a turn to speak and gushed about their excitement with the return, with Skyline President Melissa Moreno exclaiming that "I cannot tell you how thrilling it is"; President Jennifer Taylor-Mendoza of the College of San Mateo (CSM) echoing, "It's exciting to be back on campus"; and Cañada College Interim President Kim Lopez giddily reporting that the campus atmosphere was infused with "really a lot of joy" that was "palpable in the air."

The public comment period made clear just how divorced these sentiments are from the reality in the classrooms. Offering a revealing window into classroom conditions, Skyline sociology instructor Rika said that, due to the district's lifting of all social distancing requirements, there was "no proper social distancing in my classroom with that many students, and everybody was considered to be exposed. As a result, 20% of my class . . . could not attend the second class."

Likewise, CSM astronomy instructor Elisha recounted how her students "are doing labs together" despite there being "no social distancing at all," saying of the situation, "*This is dangerous* [original emphasis]!" These reports are consistent with the experience of an AFT survey respondent, quoted by AFT Local Executive Secretary Marianne Kalensky as stating that, "One lecture class has an enrollment cap of 60. The room was filled with no available seats. Students were very close to each other."

Students voiced the very same concerns as these faculty members during the meeting. As part of her powerful speech, Manisha, a Skyline student, asked, "How are we meant to put our focus on education if we are fearful and stressed out about contracting this potentially deadly virus? How are teachers meant to teach us to the best of their abilities if they are constantly put at risk?"

In another powerful speech by a Skyline student, Kat stated:

I ask that as a school, *especially* [original emphasis] in the context of the surge we are in, we hold ourselves accountable to the highest possible standards of safety and care for our community, which is not what I have seen happen so far in this process of returning to campus. . . . I have no interest in attending classes in person if my faculty and staff and my fellow students do not feel safe.

Delivering remarks that were sharply critical of the district, Jonathan, who also attends Skyline, said:

I'm speaking to you as a human being who's concerned about the health and safety of others before my own. . . . We must go above and beyond to help others, not for personal gain, or recognition, or an upcoming election . . . because that's the right thing to do. . . . You will be judged by the actions you take right

now by all who must follow your directives.

After he attempted to lead a moment of silence “for the 5.6 million people we have lost to COVID worldwide and for the very real possibility of laying a classmate, faculty, or family member to rest due to inaction,” Board President Richard Holober rebuffed him, saying, “You have 3 minutes to speak, and you have 1 minute left if you’d like to use it,” immediately calling on the next speaker.

Some instructors have taken advantage of the opportunity to keep their classes online. Twenty-year veteran Skyline mathematics instructor Tadashi reported that “about 50% of my students are far more comfortable, they thanked me for having that choice and have been staying remote” and that district policy has caused “a lot of student stress, individual conversations with students almost in tears over this.” Along similar lines, physics instructor Emilie, who also teaches at Skyline, reported that after contacting “students to ask about moving it [classes] online,” most replied, “Yes, please move it online,” adding that “the classroom has now become a source of anxiety for faculty and students alike.”

This book compiles the most critical programmatic statements, polemics, scientific analyses, interviews, and news articles published by the World Socialist Web Site on the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a social and political chronology of this world historic event based on a Marxist and Trotskyist perspective.

The response of the AFT is diametrically opposed to the humane sentiments articulated at the Board of Trustees meeting. The union is marching in lockstep with the Democratic Party’s policies of deliberate mass infection, manifested most recently in California Governor Gavin Newsom’s announcement of the elimination of nearly all COVID-19 mitigation measures as part of his unscientific “endemic plan.” Instead of fighting to prevent COVID-19 infections through collective public health measures, the union is portraying the pandemic as a question of personal choice, arguing only that students, faculty, and staff be given access to masks and limited online learning opportunities as temporary palliative measures.

Citing the AFT survey involving 166 participants—or 20 percent of district faculty—AFT Local Executive Secretary Kalensky opined that “there’s definitely some good news,” claiming that the majority of instructors “said that most of their students were comfortable coming to in-person classes.”

Quoting one such instructor reflecting the same excitement as the district officials, she read, “My in-person students have all expressed excitement about being in class in person. . . . those students, they want to be here and are happy to work in pairs and small groups.” Emphasizing her organization’s opposition to virtual learning to fight the pandemic, in her concluding remarks she stated that present conditions:

speak to the need for the district to provide a *temporary* [original emphasis] remote option for students who would benefit from it. To be clear, we as AFT are not asking that all in-person courses and student services be moved online. . . . We are all here for our students and we all want in-person learning this semester to succeed. With some flexibility and these . . . accommodations, we know that it will.

Students and educators at SMCCCD are correct to oppose the return to in-person instruction. COVID-19 continues to kill over 10,000 people a week in the United States, and over 1,000 a week in California alone. Although official case counts have fallen significantly from their Omicron peak, the highly infectious and immune-evasive BA.2 variant is spreading rapidly in all 50 states. Even so-called mild cases can result in debilitating long-term symptoms, whose effects and duration are not yet fully understood.

The first step in fighting against mass infection is a complete break with its proponents: the Democratic and Republican parties and the trade unions. We urge SMCCCD students and educators to form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of and in opposition to the administration, the trade unions, and the Democratic Party, to fight for safe, remote learning with all necessary educational and financial support to students and workers. This must be part of a broader fight within the working class to eliminate COVID-19 and save countless lives. This struggle is inseparable from the fight against the US/NATO war drive against Russia, which threatens to plunge humanity into a third world war fought between nuclear-armed powers. We call on those who agree with this perspective to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today, help build the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, and attend this Saturday’s international online meeting, *Fight COVID! Save lives! Stop the drive to World War III!*, at 1pm Pacific Time.



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