

Los Angeles schools reopen as county health officials cover for removal of public health measures at public forum

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Schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) reopened Monday, August 15, without any mitigation measures against COVID-19 and the growing monkeypox pandemic. While COVID-19 infections and deaths continue to rise and monkeypox begins to make its first appearances in schools, city and state officials and their accomplices in the United Teachers of Los Angeles have made clear that nothing whatsoever will be done to prevent new infections.

The opening of the country's second-largest district comes as the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) ends social distancing and quarantining measures as well as testing measures for public schools. The policy at all levels of government is to deliberately allow the virus to spread without hindrance on the false grounds that the pandemic cannot be brought under control. This is setting the stage for yet another massive winter surge.

While the move to reopen schools early last year was a criminal act in and of itself, there were at least some mitigation measures in place, even if they were mostly inadequate. The beginning of the 2022–2023 school year, however, will see the abandonment of any and all COVID-19 testing which last year took place on a weekly basis. Masks, which last year were mandatory, are now completely optional, even in indoor settings.

Should children experience rashes consistent with symptoms of monkeypox, parents are simply urged to contact a pediatrician and keep their children home if possible.

Anticipating that the reckless lifting of any and all public health measures will result in massive backlash from students and parents, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH) held a virtual Town Hall on Back

to School Safety on Wednesday, August 11, to assuage concerns.

The meeting began with moderator LACDPH Director Dr. Barbera Ferrer outlining the current state of the COVID-19 pandemic in Los Angeles County. Her description of the current situation was harrowing. Rates of transmission remain high, with an average of 3,800 cases a day over the course of the week, with 4,500 new cases last Wednesday.

It should be noted that on August 12, the last Friday before the start of school, the LACDPH moved the community transmission level from high to medium, even though the number of new cases on Friday was 3,995 and the test positivity rate was still at 12.47 percent, essentially the same as the numbers from two days previous, when the LACDPH still referred to the rate of community transmission as high.

Dr. Ferrer then went on to explain that LA County was still seeing an average of 15 deaths a day before expressing her “hope,” that the numbers would go down. After which, she thanked everyone for helping to keep the COVID-19 numbers down as everyone was being welcomed back into schools.

It was at this point that Dr. Ferrer admitted that children do get COVID-19 and children do in fact die from COVID-19. Over the course of the pandemic, more than 631,000 children have tested positive for COVID-19 in Los Angeles County alone. Said Ferrer, “in fact, over the past 30 days that ended on August 6, over 13,400 children ages five to 17 were confirmed COVID-19 cases in LA County. That represented about 9 percent of all of our cases this past month.”

Despite such alarming figures, Ferrer and the rest of the panel claimed that the district and the county were in “a better place” with access to “better tools,” none of which the district will be employing anyway.

Audience members, however, were largely not taken in by such false optimism as was reflected during the question and answer period.

The very first question was, “Given the magnitude of the pandemic and that our children can be infected, can there be more online options for both students and for teachers?”

Dr. Debra Duardo, Los Angeles County school superintendent, responded, “Districts want to accommodate families and do whatever it takes to make their child do well in school, but after the initial lockdowns legislation changed ... now the type of online instruction that can be offered is limited to independent studies. Not the remote learning that we were accustomed to when schools were closed. Because of the way the law was changed, it has limited what is available.”

The WSWs spoke to Denise Navarro from the nearby Inglewood School District who was very upset with the stand-down on mitigation measures. “This teacher in Hawaii is trying to organize a teacher strike because the governor is dropping all COVID measures. The same here. Last year at my children’s school they were testing weekly. They tested all the kids if their parents signed up for it. And then they stopped doing that.

“For me as a parent, I had my kids sign up for it because I would want them to get tested properly. It was the rapid test and the other test. If they came up positive, we’d have to go pick them up basically. And then the other test was given to confirm the rapid test results. It’s a more secure test, which I trust.

“I think they stopped the testing in April, when we came back from spring vacation. As parents, we brought that up in PTA meetings. We brought that up because I don’t think they should have just stopped it because we have to know who has COVID.”

But what parents, students and teachers want and need to stay safe has no bearing on the way public health is now administered. When asked why masking was not required at the meeting, given that the transmission rate was high, a Public Health Officer stated that as long as the hospitals were not operating at capacity, masks would not be required and that the LACDPH was simply following the guidance set down by the CDC. The officer added that the situation was dynamic, and in any case, the LACDPH had issued a strong recommendation to wear a mask, and that they “do not make that recommendation lightly.”

There was also a great deal of concern expressed about monkeypox and the dangers that it poses to the children, but these too were dismissed out of hand, with officials simply stating that teachers who have to come into physical contact with students should wear gloves. What should be done about students, especially younger students, was left unsaid and avoided. As with everything else, other than forcing students and teachers back into unsafe schools to learn in person, nothing is required. Schools do not have to provide

PPE, nobody has to mask, people should have “access” to testing, but again, it is not required.

The panelists, including Dr. Ferrer, also made the claim that the risk of coming into contact with monkeypox in the school setting is very low, that “we have not seen that happening.” Each of them, however, is aware that monkeypox has exploded over the course of the last month, while schools have been on break. The LACDPH has abdicated its responsibility to ensure the health and safety of those supposedly under its care.

As for the response of the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) to the school reopening, its contract ran out at the end of June, and rather than call for a strike authorization vote before or after the contract ran out, they are keeping teachers on the job and in the dark even as schools are set to return with two deadly viral outbreaks spreading concurrently. This is in keeping with their role in forcing teachers and students to return to in-person learning, which at the time, they said would be unsafe with a test positivity rate above 5 percent. Now that it stands at two-and-a-half times that, they are silent.

Instead, the UTLA has launched an unfair labor practices lawsuit against LAUSD, in order to deflect teacher’s attention with toothless appeals to the courts. Indeed, the legal complaint is limited only to allegations that the union was not included in a decision to offer voluntary overtime.

A strike by LA teachers would immediately have broad support and would resonate in particular with dockworkers at the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, who have also been kept on the job without a contract by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union and the Biden administration. This is exactly what the UTLA is determined to avoid, but a movement by teachers and parents must be formed in order to reverse the abandonment of public health measures in the name of profit and save lives.



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