

Children crammed back into Philippine schools amid COVID-19 surge

Isagani Sakay
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On Monday August 22, the Marcos government in the Philippines re-opened schools for in-person education, herding over 27 million children back into dilapidated and unsafe public schools nationwide after more than two years of closed classes. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to rip through the population.

The criminal policies of the Marcos administration, prioritizing profit over the lives of working families, follow the pattern established by the major capitalist powers, above all the United States. Disregarding science and even the most basic public health measures, the government is forcing the re-opening of schools to cut costs and ensure that businesses are able to function fully and resume the full-throttle production of profit.

Only 19 percent of the children returning to the classrooms are fully vaccinated. The same day that schools reopened, the government published a seven-day tally of 23,403 new infections, including 308 COVID related deaths, raising the country's official COVID death toll since 2020 to 61,386. These figures drastically underestimate the actual spread of the pandemic which has been systematically under-tested and underreported.

Only the most minimal of mitigations are in place, including a mask mandate, temperature checks, handwashing, and, when the government deems there is enough space, physical distancing. In the inevitable event of outbreaks in the education system, there will be no quarantines or lockdowns. These policies stand in marked contrast to the measures taken when the health of the ruling class is imperiled. In early August, the Philippine Senate imposed an immediate lockdown when seven senators out of the 24 were tested positive for the COVID-19 virus.

The conditions to which students are being returned are appalling. Pictures and videos published in the news

and widely circulated on social media showed scenes of students walking down flooded roads to reach schools, students in flooded classrooms diligently studying, students without chairs or desks, and overcrowded classrooms.

The *Rappler* news website reported class sizes of 50 to 60 students in seven schools within the National Capital Region. In the province of Pampanga, one school was reported flooded by heavy rains and in the Camarines province, nine classes were without classrooms according to *Business World* and were likely assembled together in the school gym.

The lack of classrooms is no surprise. Two days before the opening, speaking to a budgetary congressional committee, Education Undersecretary Epimaco Densing III admitted that the country confronted a deficit of 91,000 classrooms or 10 percent of the classroom requirement nationwide.

The overcrowding of classes is further exacerbated by the more than 26,000 teaching positions reported vacant in the public school system as of 2021. Entry-level teachers are paid a mere \$US452 a month, while the most senior level positions receive just over \$US1,100.

The return to in-person instruction was the first order issued by Vice President Sarah Duterte, the daughter of previous President Rodrigo Duterte. She is secretary of the Department of Education. On opening day, speaking at an elementary school in Bataan province, Duterte declared the resumption of in-person classes a "victory" for basic education.

"We can no longer make COVID-19 as an excuse to keep our children from their schools. The Philippines has been reopening just like the rest of the world reopens," Duterte announced. "We cannot make the lack of educational infrastructure or the inadequate

number of classrooms in certain provinces another excuse to keep our children from schools,” she added.

Duterte mocked the desperate and often valiant efforts of parents over nearly three years to teach their children at home despite the grossly underfunded distance learning conducted by the teachers and schools. She threatened that she would send children back to their parent’s teaching as punishment if they were not diligent in the classroom.

Children are being forced back into crowded classrooms without any regard for their health or safety, or for that of their families. More than half of all schools, 29,721 schools, still adhere to a so-called blended modality, with in-person classes at least three days a week while the rest of instruction days are being conducted online or through learning modules. By November, however, full in-person classes will be mandatory for all primary and secondary levels “regardless of the COVID-19 alert level imposed by the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases or the Department of Health in areas where schools are located.”

The drive to herd children back into classrooms has been demanded by businessmen and international financial institutes from as far back as late 2020. The effort to keep children safe from a deadly virus was seen from the onset as an unacceptable cap on the production of profits in the country. In December 2020, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) released a report claiming the cost of school closures to save lives was too high for the benefit gained.

The cost of saving a life, according to the ADB, “equates to ?768 million per life saved for closure at all levels, ?366 million per life saved from closure for 15+ year olds, and ?1.38 billion per life saved from closure for those under 15 years of age. These costs are far higher than is typically considered acceptable for public policy.” The figures are absurd, but the calculations demonstrate with their cold remorseless logic precisely what is at stake for world capitalism: children’s lives are not as valuable as profit margins.

The return to in-person schooling is being presented as an urgent measure to address the over 90 percent learning poverty rate reported by the World Bank in 2022. Learning poverty is defined as the inability of a 10-year-old to read and comprehend a single line of text or sentence.

That figure for learning poverty in the Philippines stood at already appalling 70 percent in 2019 prior to the pandemic lockdown. Education in the country has never been funded at a rate that would even remotely meet the needs of children. The lockdown exacerbated this crisis, not because it ended in-class education, but because alternative forms of instruction received little funding and parents received no aid.

The claim that children are being forced back into dangerous, overcrowded and dilapidated classrooms for their own good is a lie. The concern of the Marcos government, like its counterparts around the globe is profit, ensuring above all that parents are in factories and workplaces, and not at home caring for their families.



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