

# Prince George's County school system becomes latest Maryland district to lift mask mandate

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On Monday, August 29, the Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) system in Maryland announced it would drop its mask mandate effective Tuesday, September 6. The announcement followed the first full day back in school for students in the Washington D.C. suburb.

PGCPS is joining school systems in the state and within the Washington D.C. metropolitan area in making protective masks optional.

PGCPS CEO Monica Goldson cited declining COVID-19 positivity rates in making the decision in a message released Tuesday. "All staff, students and families are encouraged to support personal decisions on mask-wearing," read the message, promoting the worst forms of individualism.

The "personal choice" policy is similar to that which was adopted by neighboring Montgomery County Public Schools, which introduced an "On or Off, It's Just Me" campaign last spring. That policy urged parents, teachers and students to "respect each others' choices" with regards to masking.

The decision came two-and-a-half weeks after the school district reinstated mandatory mask wearing "until further notice" under recommendation of the Prince George's County Health Department. A mask-optional plan had been in place back in July.

According to the *Washington Post*, the county kept the requirement in place until it reached a COVID-19 vaccination rate of over 80 percent. As of September 1, only two ZIP codes—20707 (Laurel) and 20769 (Glenn Dale)—reached that benchmark for residents aged five or older. This exposed the hypocrisy of Goldson's previous claims that she was exercising an "abundance of caution" regarding COVID-19.

Goldson concluded her statement by declaring that the district was "not going to put any pressure on anyone who wants to keep their mask on."

The Democrats had supported limited mitigation efforts as a substitute for temporary school and workplace closures, which are necessary for the containment and elimination of COVID. They have since abandoned any pretense of slowing the spread of the deadly and debilitating virus, with Biden fully adopting Trump's "let it rip" policy.

Prince George's County Education Association, which previously endorsed the Democratic Party-led district's mask requirement in schools, has remained silent following the sudden dropping of mask mandates.

In comments to CNN published August 31—two days after the county's decision—PGCEA President Donna Christy spoke about teachers "burning out and leaving districts scrambling to fill jobs."

While the union president acknowledged the "exodus" of teachers leaving the district for "higher pay" and "better working conditions," she said nothing about the district's decision to drop its masking requirements.

"My union hasn't even said anything about the status of our tentative agreement, much less the masks [policy]," a PGCPS teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

"Orientation this year was ugly," the PGCPS teacher added, explaining that her school was "cramming kids into classrooms and violating fire and safety codes" alongside social distancing rules. "Aside from the masks, we have no sanitation measures... We have never been in compliance" with public health

requirements, she said.

The teacher also said the school regularly put 45-50 kids into “non-core” classes. Even core classes can expect to have as many as 40 students per class by the end of the year.

“I did not have an actual lunch break last year,” the teacher explained. “You’re expected to attend meetings all day and prepare a curriculum. If you don’t do that, you’ll get bad scores.”

PGCPS is currently missing 1,100 teaching positions and 100 bus drivers. “We expect to still have on average about four-and-a-half vacancies per school for this upcoming school year,” Goldson told NBC in August.

As a result, the school system has turned to privatizing school functions. “Our entire curriculum is owned by Discovery Education” the teacher who spoke to the WSWS said, referring to the Charlotte, North Carolina-based private education company. “They have complete control over our classrooms,” she added.

The Biden administration and the rest of the political establishment is seeking to chloroform the public over the continued danger of the pandemic. This includes the misleading Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) community level chart, under which almost three-quarters of all counties are either at “medium” or “low” level.

The community transmission chart, which tracks new cases per 100,000 people, tells a different story: 89 percent of all counties have high community transmission levels—100 or more new cases per 100,000, plus 10 percent or more positive nucleic acid amplification tests (NAATs). Furthermore, an additional 7 percent have a “substantial” transmission level.

All counties in Maryland have high transmission levels, except for Carroll, Baltimore, Calvert and Caroline counties, plus the District of Columbia, which have substantial levels.

Last week, the Biden administration ended its federal program that provided free COVID-19 testing, not only through test kits, but also in schools and shelters, leaving the working class even more vulnerable to a pandemic which is far from over.

Those who return to schools will also have to reckon with the painful virus monkeypox, which threatens more than ever to erupt into a pandemic. As of

September 1, the US has 19,465 cases of monkeypox, more than any other country, according to the CDC. The CDC downplays the monkeypox virus with as much vigor as it does COVID-19, stating recently, “at this time, there is no need for widespread vaccination for monkeypox among children or staff at K-12 schools or early childhood settings.”

Educators who strive to organize resistance and strike for better conditions find their struggles stifled and shut down by the unions.

This was the case with the teachers’ strike in Columbus, Ohio late last month. The Columbus Education Association, the PGCEA’s sister organization, shut down the strike in the dark of night, coming to a “conceptual agreement” with district officials, which ignored teachers demands for substantial raises, smaller class sizes, improved ventilation and the cleaning up insect and rodent-infested schools.

Last week, the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, made up of workers and concerned parents across the country, held an emergency online event, calling parents, teachers and workers from across the US and world to organize resistance to the ruling class “COVID-19 forever” policy.

The Socialist Equality Party of the United States, in a statement endorsing the meeting, called on workers and educators to “harness their collective strength, unify across the country and internationally, and prepare for a nationwide educators’ strike to stop both pandemics and to demand a giant investment in public education.”

An essential prerequisite for this is the “expansion of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, in solidarity with the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), by building local committees in every school and neighborhood, independent of the trade unions and capitalist political parties.”



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