# Teachers unions, White House host town hall to demand in-person learning as school year starts

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As tens of millions of children and educators return to school amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the two largest teachers unions in the United States co-hosted a town hall with the Biden administration. The purpose of September 1 event was to send the message that in-person learning will continue no matter what level of sickness transpires this fall.

Only weeks into the new semester, schools have closed due to COVID-19 outbreaks in Louisiana, California, Kentucky and Oklahoma. Following the latest COVID-19 guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), virtually all public health measures have been abandoned in schools across the country, including quarantining, testing and contact tracing.

Characterized by distortions and cynical omissions about school safety, the event demonstrated once again that the US political establishment and its pillars in the trade union bureaucracy are entirely united in the demand that schools remain in-person. The true meaning of the “partnership” between the trade unions and the “pro-union” Biden administration is for the former to serve the latter by keeping workers in line and on the job.

The town hall was hosted by the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and featured NEA and AFT Presidents Becky Pringle and Randi Weingarten, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Ashish Jha, US Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, US Secretary of Health and Human Services Xavier Becerra, and a recorded video by First Lady Jill Biden.

The first segment of the question-and-answer-style event related to the ongoing dangers of COVID-19 and monkeypox in schools, which Jha and Walensky did their best to downplay while ignoring the horrific toll the pandemic has had on children and educators alike.

With unanimous praise for the Biden administration's accomplishment of forcing the full reopening of in-person learning during the first year of his presidency, no participant mentioned any of the consequences of this policy.

These include the needless infections of tens of millions of children, which officially stands near 15 million but is estimated to be closer to 51 million (roughly 70 percent). CDC data shows that over 154,000 children have been hospitalized and at least 1,761 have died from COVID-19. An investigative report by the *World Socialist Web Site* estimates that approximately 8,000 active and retired school employees have died from the disease. The risk and devastating implications of long-COVID went entirely unmentioned.

Both Jha and Walensky were adamant that schools must remain in person. Jha stated, “we can keep students and staff safe in schools full time, in-person this year, [due to] the miracle of science and the work of this administration.” Walensky emphasized that even with ongoing transmission, “closing schools can’t be the answer... We recommend a layered approach, *not* closing schools.”

The two spoke on behalf of the anti-scientific vaccines-only strategy that has characterized Biden’s response to the pandemic. Walensky stated that the CDC’s primary recommendation is “prevention” which, she said, “starts with vaccination.” In practice, the CDC has repeatedly made clear that its recommendations do not prioritize prevention. One of the most glaring examples of this is the agency’s reduction of the recommended isolation period to five days despite knowing individuals are typically infectious for closer to two weeks.

Second, the claim that prevention starts with vaccination is another distortion. Studies have repeatedly shown that vaccine effectiveness (VE) against both infection and serious outcomes dramatically wanes over time and that the virus has evolved to be more immune-evading, particularly with the emergence of the Omicron variant last winter. Data presented in March from New York found that for children aged five to 11, VE against infection dropped from 68 to 12 percent during the six weeks between December 13, 2021 and January 30, 2022. A genuine prevention strategy would adopt a zero-COVID approach and make full use of all available public health measures, including targeted lockdowns, mass surveillance testing, full isolation and quarantine of infected and exposed people, with widespread use of high-quality N95 or better respirators, and clean air interventions.

When asked about the importance of ventilation and filtration in schools, Jha and Walensky acknowledged that clean air was a critical component of reducing COVID-19 and other disease transmission. However, neither admitted the actual state of HVAC (heating, ventilating and air conditioning) systems in US schools. Thousands of schools across the US have either insufficient or no air conditioning whatsoever, forcing hundreds of schools in Philadelphia, Baltimore and San Diego to close over the past two weeks due to high temperatures in the classrooms.

Jha claimed that $122 billion had been made available to schools specifically for ventilation upgrades through the American Rescue Plan (ARP). Actually, a band-aid $122 billion was allocated to schools through the ARP to be spread across a range of pressing needs, including systems upgrades (not limited to HVAC), teacher and staff hiring and retention, summer and after-school programs for students, mental health support, personal protective equipment, and more.

A 2021 report by the Government Accountability Office estimated

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that 41 percent of school districts in the US needed to update or replace HVAC systems in at least half of their schools, around 36,000 buildings in total. Researchers at the Learning Policy Institute calculated that the cost to upgrade or replace HVAC systems in all 36,000 buildings would be approximately $72 billion. And once new systems are installed, they require regular professional oversight and maintenance to function properly, practices which are commonly neglected due to lack of funding.

Most ARP funds are not being used for HVAC modernization. A White House press statement from March analyzed districts' budgeting of the funds. Sixty percent were being used for investments in staffing, learning support programs, and mental and physical health. Only an estimated $10 billion will be invested in HVAC and ventilation improvements, a fraction of what is required to ensure clear air in all schools.

Further, a CDC study from June examining ventilation improvements in schools found that only 38.5 percent of schools surveyed reported replacing or upgrading HVAC systems and only 28.2 percent reported installing HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filters into classrooms. In order to improve ventilation, most districts were adopting low-to-no cost measures such as opening doors or windows "when safe to do so."

Addressing the danger of monkeypox spreading in schools, Jha and Walensky claimed the risk was negligible and "not cause for alarm." While the outbreak has so far been concentrated mainly among men who have sex with men, it can be transmitted through non-sexual skin-to-skin contact, contact with infected clothing or surfaces, and through airborne transmission. At least 17 children and 136 women have been infected, and universities across the US have reported cases. Moreover, the government's response to monkeypox has so far been consistent with its reckless and indifferent response to COVID-19, essentially allowing both diseases to spread freely.

The two union leaders barely mentioned the devastating impact the pandemic has had on teachers and students. "After two years of uncertainty and disruption," Weingarten said, "yes, we need as normal as school year as possible."

The AFT president was particularly obsequious in her praise on the administration. "We've had three administration secretaries talking to us about issues that are really important. We all recognize that parents and teachers working together are key to kids' lives and futures. It's an honor to see and work with this administration, and the First Lady, who is essentially the First Teacher."

NEA President Rebecca Pringle asked Jha and Walensky, "As you hear so many schools and local districts talk about returning to normal, I think about the inequities that have existed forever in communities of color. Return to normal—how do we take into account how those communities have been disproportionately impacted?"

The promotion of identity politics is the stock-in-trade of the Democratic Party, which does everything it can to conceal the class divisions in society and the pro-capitalist character of its policies. The "diverse" panel, full of upper middle-class bureaucrats and political appointees who are all paid hundreds of thousands of dollars per year, sought to cover over the fact that the pandemic, and the criminal response of both parties to it, has had a devastating impact on workers of all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The second portion of the event focused on mental health and academic performance, with Secretaries Cardona and Becerra touting "game changing" investments into education and mental health support by the Biden administration. The $88 billion in discretionary spending for the Department of Education that Biden proposed in his 2023 budget pales in comparison with the $813 billion for the military , and, should it actually pass without being whittled down, will do little to make up for decades of budget cuts and underfunded schools.

The ARP funding is due to expire in 2024, and districts have struggled to spend it for a variety of reasons, such as wariness about incurring long-term expenditures in the face of an imminent funding cliff.

As for using the money on immediate systems upgrades, a public letter sent to Cardona in January by a group of education, health and labor organizations urged the administration to extend the deadline to use the funds, explaining that "limited contractor availability and supply chain disruptions" made it "nearly impossible" to utilize ARP funds for facility upgrades by 2024.

There was a great deal more lamentation about the impact of school closures on students' standardized test scores than on the long-term effects of COVID-19, grief, or prolonged anxiety about the disease itself. Cardona passingly referenced the "150,000" US children who had lost a parent or caregiver to COVID-19. The latest estimates by the Imperial College of London actually place the figure near 225,000, including 210,000 who lost one or both parents.

Regarding learning loss, the corporate media has sought to blame remote instruction for the results of the recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report, which showed a significant drop in reading and math test scores among age nine students between 2020 and 2022. However, these drops spanned every geographical region in the United States, including those that were almost entirely in-person during 2021-2022.

Finally, there was a self-deluding tone to the event, marked by a wild underestimation the anger and alertness of the working class, which has endured two and half years of mass infection and death, while real wages and living standards have plummeted. Cardona said, "this will be the greatest school year ever." Jill Biden reminisced about the scent of freshly waxed floors and the summer sun on her skin. Do they honestly think such bromides will fall on friendly ears?

Last year, tens of thousands of educators, students and parents participated in walk-outs, sickouts and strikes in dozens of cities and towns across the United States, protesting the dangerous return to in-person learning. This movement was sabotaged by the NEA and AFT, which fully support the sacrifice of human life for corporate profit. Now, with the abandonment of even basic mitigation measures in schools, the stage is set for another catastrophic year.

The fight for safe and fully funded schools cannot be left to the trade unions, which betray every strike and subordinate workers to the political establishment and capitalist system at every turn. The struggle of educators requires building independent rank-and-file committees in every school and neighborhood to protect the health and safety of students, educators and parents. They will be a crucial component in the development of a politically conscious mass movement, aimed at mobilizing the working class on the basis of a socialist program to abolish capitalism and build a society based on human need, not profit.

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