

US: Full Steam Ahead on Reopening Schools? No Way, Say Teachers

Saturday 25 July 2020, by [DOLS Monique](#), [LAMPHERE Peter](#) (Date first published: 21 July 2020).

Donald Trump has launched an all-out war to reopen schools across the country this fall. Educators are standing up to resist plans that would put our students, their families, or our co-workers in danger.

Trump Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany [laid out](#) the administration's position: "The president has said unmistakably that he wants schools to open... And when he says open, he means open in full, kids being able to attend each and every day at their school. The science should not stand in the way of this."

Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos made it clear that health and safety concerns are being put aside, even as COVID spikes erupt in Southern and Western states that plan to open schools in a matter of weeks. DeVos declared that "it is not acceptable for schools not to reopen" and threatened to cut federal funding to states that refuse to comply.

While the Los Angeles and San Diego school districts have announced that the school year will begin online amid rising COVID-19 cases, the mayors of Chicago and New York are moving "[full steam ahead](#)" with plans for "hybrid" school reopenings, which include students attending a few days a week.

In response, school workers have already begun organizing safety committees in our school chapters to educate ourselves and discuss what a safe reopening could look like.

Teachers recognize the educational and socioemotional damage that is being done to students through remote learning, and we desperately miss our students and classrooms.

But many of us are coming to the conclusion that any opening of school buildings, however partial or "hybrid," carries tremendous risks and can't be achieved safely—especially while the community spread is increasing nationally.

Calls to refuse to return to unsafe conditions in school buildings are gathering steam. There is a growing sentiment among educators across the country that if the politicians won't keep our communities safe, we will.

Safety Committee

One group of teachers in the Bronx has organized with the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE) caucus, a group inside the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), to put together a [Health Justice Agenda](#) that speaks to what needs to happen for schools to open.

Schools are unique transmission sites for COVID-19. What happened in New York City in March

should be a cautionary tale for the rest of the country. By some [estimates](#), 50-80% of the more than 23,000 COVID-19 deaths could have been avoided had the city been closed down one to two weeks earlier.

Ilona Nanay, a teacher at a grade 6-12 school in the Soundview section of the Bronx and member of the MORE #HealthJustice Committee, said that the pandemic as well as the recent rebellion against racism have “made folks more aware and inclined to heed a call to action and mobilize.”

In a recent survey of her school site, a strong majority of her co-workers supported a sickout. “There are a lot of fears and concerns and distrust” of district leadership, she said, “in terms of their ability to protect the health and safety of our communities.”

Teachers have formed a committee to discuss the reopening plans, share information, and activate parents. The committee has drafted a letter advocating strong action.

Members hope to get parents and students, as well as a majority of faculty, to sign it. “The narrative is pitting parents against teachers,” Nanay said. “Parents have a million concerns around this.”

Safety committees like these can become the core of a movement to resist returning to school buildings in the fall. Some union leaders have already stepped up to take a firm stand against in-person reopening, as in Chicago and Los Angeles.

Sickouts Planned

Teachers around the country are preparing for protest actions. Many are already filing for medical accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act to continue working from home. While the ADA doesn’t provide relief for those caregiving for the medically vulnerable, some teachers may apply anyway, in a political effort to point out how dangerous the situation is.

Others are preparing for sickouts and other job actions in August. These are likely to be rolling and begin in individual schools, but have the potential to spread, well, virally. Sickouts are illegal in most states and of course have to be carefully planned, preferably with parent allies, to avoid putting students who do come to school at more risk.

But educators are desperate. “I and a bunch of other people in my chapter didn’t have faith that the Department of Education or the UFT will be able to keep us safe. The feeling that I have is that most people are terrified about going back,” said Carolyn Sykora, a Bronx art teacher. “People are scrambling for options—even unpaid FMLA leaves or early retirements—that’s the level of concern of teachers. We have got to stick together in the fall.”

Pressure From Below

This organizing and anger at the base have pushed city and national union leaders into action. Lily Eskelsen García, president of the National Education Association, the nation’s largest union, [told Politico](#) that members “are panicked and parents should be panicked.”

A sickout threat led by the MORE caucus successfully closed New York City schools in March. That has no doubt been on the mind of UFT President Michael Mulgrew, who recently has been demanding increased childcare from the city for teachers and other workers to relieve pressure on schools.

[Many unions](#) have also been demanding paid family leave, extension of unemployment, and no evictions, as part of the reforms needed to protect students and their families.

The strike waves of the last couple of years have made the case that our working conditions are our students' learning conditions. Today, our health and well-being are closely tied to the health and well-being of our students and communities. If we get sick, our communities get sick.

Risks of Reopening

One only needs to look at a study from South Korea to see that opening schools in the U.S. right now is unsafe. The [new study](#) indicates that the reopening of schools will lead to the spread of COVID-19; that contrary to common claims, children of all ages can spread the virus; and that in particular, children between the ages of 10-19 spread it just as much as adults.

The American Association of Pediatrics revved the engines for reopening when it issued a report that "strongly advocates that all policy considerations for the coming school year should start with a goal of having students physically present in school." Trump and crew have eagerly taken up this banner, despite the AAP's backtracking on their original statement.

But scientists are worried that COVID might be more [transmittable by airborne particles](#) than previously thought, [especially in closed, air-conditioned environments](#).

The Centers for Disease Control, at least until the Trump administration manages to force revisions, [recommends six-foot social distancing](#) "where possible" in schools. But this will be simply impossible for most settings. Staffing and space constraints make it extremely difficult— not to mention the challenge of encouraging six-year-olds (or teenagers!) to socially distance. CDC guidelines also encourage shutdowns of schools in the event of positive cases, but it's unclear if local school districts plan to follow those rules.

The Only Solution

Parents and educators have, of course, been concerned about the effects of remote learning on the mental and socio-emotional health of students. And every teacher knows that students can't learn as well by videoconference as they can through in-person interactions.

But Jia Lee, a New York elementary school teacher, put it this way at a recent forum: "One thing has been abundantly clear about the plans and decisions to possibly and prematurely reopen schools. It is not about supporting students—it's about reopening businesses."

The politicians are responding to an economic imperative to reopen the economy to full profitability, and a crisis of public revenue caused by the fallout from the slowdown; [New York has lost \\$7.4 billion in tax revenue](#). The federal government has not been forthcoming with relief; the HEROES act languishes in the Senate. Unwilling to tax the rich, state and local governments are instead driving to reopen workplaces at all costs. That means parents need childcare.

Meanwhile, as supplemental federal unemployment expires, many working parents have no guaranteed income and are now getting pushed back into work under unsafe circumstances. Most had to scramble for childcare—kids were stuck at home with grandparents or older siblings, or alone—and they will continue to do so under hybrid plans that have students in schools a few days a week. Those trying to work from home have struggled with the impossible dual role of worker and caregiver/home-school teacher.

The only solution is to pay people to stay home with their children.

How to pay for it? Billions of dollars in potential tax increases have been proposed but ignored; for instance, New York State Senator Robert Jackson's Ultramillionaires tax, which would raise taxes on

the wealthiest to pay for the money long owed schools, is languishing in Albany. And despite some legislative sleight of hand, very little money has so far been taken out of police budgets in response to #DefundThePolice demands. Millions could be shifted from arresting youth of color to making sure that caregivers could stay at home with them.

Risks of Remote vs. Risks of Return

There are tremendous risks and downsides to continuing remote learning. Tech honcho Bill Gates and his crony New York Governor Andrew Cuomo are salivating about [reimagining education](#)—creating a techno-dystopia with fewer teachers. They would replace brick-and-mortar classrooms with online learning platforms, vacuum up the data from students, and suck school districts dry for corporate profit. They would love to entirely replace teachers with Google Classroom.

However, the risks of return are simply too great, and outweigh the risks of continued remote instruction.

These risks will not fall only on school workers. As in the first wave of the pandemic, any spike in cases caused by a return to classes will fall most heavily on Black and Latino families, who are more likely to be riding public transportation, working essential jobs, and attending public school.

Some plans for 90 percent remote learning might be able to be executed safely. In such a model, students with the highest needs could be served in school buildings or in outdoor classrooms where risks are lower. This could provide relief for the most vulnerable populations, like students with special needs. But questions remain about this model, including what metrics will be used to determine who is in need of in-person support, to make sure that it is not done punitively or in a way that unnecessarily exposes already vulnerable populations.

Any continuation of remote learning must be coupled with massive investment in Internet access, especially in the poorest school districts, as well as an investment in distribution of supplies and other offline materials and supports for families.

Elephant in the Room

Regardless, building a strong alliance between parents and teachers around these demands will be crucial in the weeks ahead. “Parents and teachers need to recognize that we are being put in impossible positions by those with all of the money, resources and power,” wrote Manhattan public school parent [Jennifer Roesch in a Medium post](#). “Our specific needs and individual breaking points may be different, but we are all in this together.”

All of these scenarios and problems point back to the elephant in the room: that as long as there is community spread of COVID-19 in the U.S., as long as the government continues to mishandle the crisis and refuses to learn from other countries’ successes, opening schools will be unsafe.

Educators now have the opportunity to lead the way in changing the course of how this country deals with this crisis. We do not have to live with the deaths and the suffering. Those in power have made it unsafe for us to return to school this fall, and it’s up to us to force the government to change course and pay people to stay home with their kids.

As Baltimore Teachers Union President Diamanté Brown framed it: “I just want everyone to know that educators, when we fight, we’re not just going to fight for us. We’re going to fight for those parents that are being forced to make a choice between having to go to work and putting their kids in the school building.”

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