

New York City releases dangerous school reopening plans

By Sandy English and Steve Light
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Last week, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio declared his criminal intent to reopen the largest school district in the US, with over 1.1 million students and over 75,000 teachers, on September 10. Giving voice to the interests of Wall Street that his Democratic administration so dutifully serves, he declared Thursday, “We’re full steam ahead for September. The goal, of course, to have the maximum number of kids in our schools as we begin schools.”

On Monday, New York’s Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo followed suit by announcing that public schools statewide can open in September if the two-week average coronavirus positive testing rate is below 5 percent by August 1.

De Blasio and the city’s Department of Education (DOE) have released a plan, following guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in which classes of 12 students will be held on alternating days or weeks. Students will continue remote learning on days in which they are not in a school building.

The DOE dubiously claims that these minimal social distancing measures, along with the usage of face masks and the deep cleaning of school facilities, will prevent the transmission of the coronavirus among educators and students in the city’s dilapidated schools. They fail to explain how these measures will be implemented when the district has slashed its budget by \$773 million for the coming fiscal year.

The DOE’s school reopening plan has been met with widespread skepticism by New Yorkers and opposition by educators and parents. As one educator told the online education journal Chalkbeat, “It’s just a lot more questions than answers at this point, and that’s frustrating because we have, what, eight more weeks?”

Parents must decide between July 15 and August 7 whether they would prefer a blended learning program, with children’s attendance in a physical school some days

and remote learning on others, or whether they would opt for full-time distance learning. The DOE has made no provision for daycare for children on days on which they are not in physical classrooms or for the children of educators.

The DOE’s proposed temperature checks at the school entrance does not guarantee safety from asymptomatic or presymptomatic students or teachers, while having children wear masks and social distance consistently is a near impossibility.

According to media reports, the city has no plans to bus over 90,000 children to school buildings and will only transport children with special needs for whom busing is mandated. No word has been given on if or how these buses will be cleaned. As to the hundreds of thousands of students who will simultaneously take public transportation to school, the DOE has issued no word on safety measures on the city buses and subways.

The DOE plan to reopen schools is, in fact, so full of holes, and its proposals are so improbable, that it is transparently only one more aspect of the effort to push the working class back to work regardless of the death toll. This “return-to-work” campaign has been spearheaded by the Trump administration and the corporate media, and carried out with only minor variations by Democratic and Republican politicians across the US.

As a result of these policies, the virus is now spreading out of control, with Friday seeing the highest number of new cases so far, 71,787. Yesterday saw an additional 65,488 new cases, the second highest figure to date.

The de Blasio administration’s intransigent opposition to shutting down the city by mid-March, including the public school system, caused New York to become the epicenter of the pandemic for months. To date, the city has 215,924 confirmed COVID-19 cases, 55,451 hospitalizations and 18,670 deaths, with a minimum of

4,613 additional deaths likely attributable to the virus, by far the highest figures of any state in the US.

The DOE's track record in the early days of the pandemic is nothing short of criminal. Information was suppressed by the department in early March about the rate of infection in the school system. At least 74 educators have now died from the virus, while the DOE continues to stonewall about releasing information on the circumstances of these deaths and any estimates of those who have been infected with the virus.

Also complicit in the late closing of the schools was the local teacher union, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), which refused to mobilize its membership against the continuation of in-person classes in March, despite the fact that its president, Michael Mulgrew, privately warned de Blasio of the dangers of continuing to hold classes. Only after teachers began agitating on social media for a strike or sickout and thousands signed a petition saying they would not come in to teach on March 16, did Mulgrew reluctantly send a letter asking parents to demand the mayor close schools.

One New York City teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Are we going to get to the Florida and Texas range? Hopefully not. But really, increasingly my worry is, come September where will we be? If we add all these people back to classrooms, coupled with the outdoor dining stuff that appears to be going on, there's at least going to be some spread.

"I work in a really large school where people come in by one door at the same time. We have several elevators and they are usually crowded. I don't think it's going to get any safer when flu season comes around in late October and people are showing some of the same symptoms as COVID."

The DOE has claimed that it will disinfect school buildings. Last week Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza claimed that the reopening plan calls for every school "to be deep cleaned on a nightly basis with electrostatic disinfectant sprayers, and HVAC systems are being upgraded as we speak to ensure better ventilation in all of our schools."

The teacher who spoke to the WSWS said that he had seen the DOE "so-called deep cleaning" in March, before the schools were shut, noting, "It was completely half-assed, done with a spray-bottle. Everything will be done on the cheap."

Another teacher remarked on Facebook, "the DOE needs to provide supplies for all schools as needed. They weren't doing that before Covid and we know that. It's

why many of us worry."

Cleaning, building maintenance and even reasonably sanitary conditions in school bathrooms have been degraded from years of neglect. The school system is totally unprepared to provide students and educators with a clean environment. The DOE's plan, in short, is criminally negligent.

That, however, has not stopped the UFT from giving its full backing to the plan. In a letter to its members, UFT President Michael Mulgrew said, "We believe a blended learning model, with students in class on some days and remote on others, balances our safety concerns with the need to bring students back."

Since the shutdown of the schools, the UFT has played an active role in suppressing basic information about the health and safety of teachers. It has stopped teachers from taking out grievances against the DOE for COVID-related issues. Over 200 members of the UFT have taken out an improper practice charge against the union with the New York State Public Employees Relations Board for violating its duty of fair representation.

The struggle to protect the health and safety of educators and students and to prevent the New York City public school system from once again becoming a vector for the transmission of the virus cannot come from the UFT. Like all unions, this organization's sole purpose is to ensure that any resistance to the policies of the ruling class is neutralized and turned back into fruitless efforts to change the right-wing trajectory of the Democratic Party.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on educators and parents to take matters into their own hands by forming independent, rank-and-file safety committees in every school and neighborhood, in order to build a nationwide strike movement in opposition to the unsafe reopening of schools. Inevitably, this will entail a struggle against the capitalist profit system itself and for the implementation of socialist policies. All those educators and parents interested in taking up this fight should sign up for our email newsletter and contact us today.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>