

“This district is not ready at all”

Teacher in Vancouver, Washington speaks out on school reopenings amid wildfires

By Evan Winters
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As the coronavirus continues to spread and as air quality remains “Very Unhealthy” and “Hazardous” due to wildfires, Evergreen School District in Vancouver, one of the largest in Washington state, is to partially reopen schools.

Online education began September 1 for the district’s 25,500 students and 1,500 teachers. However, many personnel were required to report to work in person. Initially the district planned to bring small groups of kindergarteners and “high-risk” students to campus for in-person instruction as early as September 10 but was forced push back these plans due to low air quality. “High-risk” students include those with special needs, English language learners (ELL), and students who are homeless or in foster care.

The district’s statements make clear that it will not use internationally recognized methods of proactive testing, contact tracing, and quarantining to prevent the spread of the virus. Instead, it is relying on masks, health screenings, hand washing, and social distancing. But schools are not equipped to handle even these elementary measures.

Frances, an experienced special education paraeducator in the district, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*. Her name has been changed to protect her from retaliation. “As my experience of summer school tells me, the district is not ready at all. The deep cleaning never happened. The classrooms continue to be hot, stuffy, and now air quality outside is hazardous so opening windows is not an option. Supplies like soap, masks, gloves are not available. I had to go on a hunt for supplies through other classrooms. I felt like a thief! I noticed most supplies I acquired were teachers’ supplies from home.”

While the district emphasizes the fact that special education students benefit from in-person services, Frances explained the health risks posed to both teachers and students. “I have medically fragile [special education] students; one is a cancer survivor. We are both high risk, and she has extended family at home going through chemotherapy. She and I were warriors in the spring, washing hands, avoiding each other. Her mother is leery about in-class instruction.”

During summer programs, even the token measures nominally in place were not enforced. At daily screenings, parents were simply asked whether their children were exhibiting symptoms, ignoring the possibility of asymptomatic spread. More than half of the students were English language learners, many of whose parents were likely unable to understand the questions. No translation services were available. The district gave teachers little guidance on how to maintain social distancing for young children. Frances says that she still has not been paid for her hours worked over the summer.

The school board referred to its summer programming as an “experiment,” echoing messages from the Trump administration.

During the first days of the official academic school year, Frances recounted the disarray. “Classified staff [including paraeducators] were to report on site starting on September 1. Certified staff were able to remotely teach from home. Classified staff was nervous, because the district cut over 400 positions and felt they must go to sites or lose their jobs. We were told we would get masks, but nobody knew where these masks were.”

The entire population of the greater Vancouver area has been exposed to air quality ranging from

“unhealthy” to “hazardous” for much of the past two weeks. Air quality index readings over 400, four times the level defined by the United States Environmental Protection Agency as “Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups” and 100 points over the “Hazardous” level, are still a regular occurrence in the area. Last week parts of the city were evacuated as the fires approached.

In this context, the respiratory systems of many people have likely been compromised, placing them at greater risk of severe illness or death from COVID-19.

Despite the dangerous air quality, the district has continued to operate school buildings. To prevent smoke from entering the buildings in the summer heat, heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems were operating using entirely recycled air. This practice creates particularly dangerous conditions for the spread of COVID-19, as the coronavirus can spread through the air via exhaled aerosols. If this practice continues when students are brought to campus, it will likely accelerate community transmission.

The county is justifying its school reopening plan on scientifically unsound medical advice. Dr. Alan Melnick, director of Clark County Public Health, acknowledged the inevitability of active cases in schools, saying, “As schools open up and given the amount of disease, we’re going to see cases here and there.” He then asserted that it would not be necessary to notify students if a teacher contracted the virus unless there was evidence of transmission. This ignores the reality of asymptomatic transmission and the strong body of scientific evidence suggesting that children can contribute substantially to asymptomatic spread.

Clark County has had 64 new cases per 100,000 residents over the recent two-week period and eight cases in county schools in other districts. Despite this, the county plans to reopen elementary schools through fifth grade if it can hold steady at this substantial level of community transmission for three weeks.

Frances expressed distrust in the local teachers union, the Washington Education Association. “My fellow coworkers are frustrated with the union. It feels as though the union doesn’t understand how child-intensive our jobs are. We are potty training autistic children. We are teaching Down Syndrome learners how to walk, eat at a pace where they won’t choke. Special education is very hands-on, and when

the union negotiators went to the district, they agreed that these services should be in-person but did not consider the needs of the staff.”

She agreed with the Socialist Equality Party’s perspective of building rank-and-file committees independent of the unions to fight for workers’ interests. She listed several possible demands, “Things I feel a safety committee could help with are very basic: masks, gloves, soap, and a clean environment to work in.

“I need a COVID-free environment. Children that are asymptomatic worry me. [We need] testing that is accessible to everyone and promoted, not hidden. Children that are sick shouldn’t be allowed to get on the bus or come into a building. Parents need to be honest and follow through with their children’s medical care, and we can’t do that if children don’t have access to health care. This is why we need universal health care, not this capitalistic, inequitable mess of a health care system we have now.”

Linking these workplace demands with political demands, Frances concluded, “Socialism is something we should strive for. All of our community members, children, adults, people of color, foster children ... everyone deserves equity in services. Everyone should have access to free and equitable education and health care.”

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