

SUNY-Oswego forced into temporary shutdown of in-person instruction after spike in COVID-19 cases

By Alex Findijs
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On Friday, the State University of New York (SUNY) Oswego announced that it is moving to full online instruction for the next two weeks due to the rapid spread of coronavirus on campus. Oswego is now the second SUNY school that has been forced to switch to remote learning after an outbreak of COVID-19. The first school to enter this phase was SUNY Oneonta, which was forced to close for the rest of the semester after more than 500 students became infected in less than two weeks—the number of confirmed infections has since risen to 723.

New York State regulations dictate that any SUNY school that reports more than 100 cases in a 14-day period must close down for a two-week period to control the spread of the virus. Oswego has not yet reached the 100-case threshold, but with 90 new on campus cases in just eight days and 199 in total, the writing was on the wall for the upstate New York School.

This is neither a blameless tragedy nor an accident as SUNY's administrators were perfectly aware of the risk that reopening and bringing students back to campus in the middle of a pandemic posed. The outbreak at Oswego and thousands of campuses across the United States is direct consequence of the policy of malign neglect, deployed indiscriminately upon the population by both Democrats and Republicans.

Taking a page from the playbook of school officials elsewhere, SUNY Chancellor James Malatras sought to place the blame for the outcome of Oswego's reckless policies on students themselves. Speaking at a press conference, Malatras remarked: "It only takes a handful of irresponsible actions by a few to spread this vicious virus across an entire campus." Additionally,

Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo told the press before schools reopened that "we should anticipate clusters... When you have large congregations of people, anticipate a cluster. Be prepared for it. Get ahead of it."

Why are schools open then? The state and SUNY administrations know that they are forcing students, professors and campus workers into unsafe conditions, yet pretend they are doing nothing wrong while passing all blame onto students. Cuomo and Malatras would set a house on fire then blame it for being made out of wood.

The vast majority of students have done everything they can to prevent the transmission of the virus. The fact that a "handful of irresponsible people" could undo all the efforts of SUNY to contain COVID-19—of which few were made—shows that the true irresponsibility was in the decision to send students back on campus despite the obvious risks.

SUNY administrators have put the barest amount of effort into protecting students. Only three of the 64 SUNY schools required testing before or during student move-in. Oswego was prematurely praised for being the third highest testing school, with 6,917 tests issued on campus. However, only 606 tests were conducted between 12 September and 18 September: Just three tests for every infected person since then!

Just last week Malatras hailed SUNY Oswego for its quality planning and testing. Malatras declared that Oswego's strategy, which has resulted in a cascade of illnesses, was a "good plan well executed."

The true explanation for this disaster in schools across New York State—and for that matter across the country—is that the drive to reopen schools is a

front-line battle in the campaign to reopen the economy. Both the Democratic and Republican parties have agreed on a central policy to let schools and workplaces reopen regardless the cost to the health and lives of workers and students.

The SUNY system is an accessory to this campaign. SUNY chancellor James Malatras has close ties to the New York Democratic Party and Governor Andrew Cuomo. Malatras worked as an advisor to Cuomo when he served as Attorney General and as Cuomo's director of state operations from 2014 to 2017.

Malatras is just the second person in 71 years to be appointed SUNY chancellor from the inner circle of a sitting governor. His appointment is clearly political, shown by his limited experience as a school administrator and the lack of a national search for potential candidates. His predecessor also had close connections to the Democratic Party. The previous chancellor, Kristina M Johnson, who resigned to become president of Ohio State University, was the undersecretary of energy in the Obama administration from 2009-2010.

The political motives of the administrators within SUNY are apparent, and they are creating disastrous conditions that reject all scientific understanding on how to fight the spread of COVID-19. The 100 cases in two weeks threshold is fairly arbitrary, and was only dropped from 9 percent of the school population after mass outbreaks ripped through schools in other states.

The 14-day testing period is also designed without clear definition for when those two-week periods take place. Basic logic would dictate that it would be a rolling 14-day period, in other words, total cases in any continuous set of 14 days regardless of when those cases began.

However, the State of New York has given schools free reign to interpret this policy however they like. The facts show this is ridiculous. By Monday, September 14, Oswego had reported over 140 cases within a 14-day period. Instead of closing, however, as the state guidelines should have required, Oswego was allowed by the State and SUNY to remain open on the claim that a new 14 day period had begun on September 12, and therefore the new cases that had brought the total over 100 did not apply towards that threshold.

By September 19 the total number of cases was 199.

Fourteen days earlier, on September 5, the total was 8. With 191 cases in a two-week period, Oswego could have almost shut down two colleges on its own but was still refusing to switch to online classes. Essentially, the tally of COVID-19 resets every 14 days at SUNY.

Highlighting the antiscientific and murderous character of this policy, epidemiologist Colleen McLaughlin, who chairs the Population Health Sciences Department at the Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, referred to Oswego's policy as an "arbitrary cut off point" according to the *Albany Times Union*.

Such are the demands of the policy of herd immunity. It does not matter how many people are infected as long as workers can be forced back on the job to make profits for the capitalists. Towards that end students and educators must be the first casualties in this offensive on the working class.

The drive to reopen schools and workplaces must be stopped. Only workers and students, armed with a socialist perspective, can organize to oppose this deadly campaign. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality calls on youth, students and faculty members looking for a serious strategy to fight against the homicidal school reopening policy to join the IYSSE and take up the fight for socialism.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>