

Massachusetts education commissioner demands “low-risk” districts resume in-person learning

By Will McCallis
23 September 2020

In lockstep with the murderous “herd immunity” policies of the ruling elite around the world, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Commissioner Jeffrey C. Riley has sent out a thuggish letter pressuring 16 “low risk” COVID school districts in the state to submit plans to resume in-person schooling.

The letter demands a written response within 10 calendar days of reopening plans consistent with DESE’s “school reopening guidance that prioritizes a return to in-person school for as many students as possible, safely.” Non-compliance will be met with audits, or in other words, a potential loss of state funds.

Riley, on behalf of the state government, is deliberately sending letters to schools that have no way to reopen safely. Many schools which have not opened as of yet are in buildings so old that they can’t be updated with necessary HVAC filtering.

DESE’s school reopening guidance is a distorted concoction of pseudo-science, lies and feigned concern for student and teacher safety, designed with the goal of allowing in-person instruction in as many districts as possible. These guidelines are part of a broader, global effort to force the economy open, regardless of the human toll. The lies at the heart of this homicidal campaign are that children can’t get infected or spread the virus easily.

The DESE guidance, published June 25, justifies reopening based on the needs of students, maintains that “there is no substitute for the attention and engagement that is only possible with in-person learning.” DESE “believe[s] that by following critical health requirements, we can safely return to in-person school.” In person learning may be ideal, but it is the life and health of children, teachers and parents for which there is “no substitute.”

In European countries with policies similar to those of DESE, the lifting of social distancing and the reopening of schools has directly led to a new eruption in cases. In Florida, one of the five states with state-mandated in-person instruction available part-time or full-time for K-12 students, cases have exploded at schools; among school-age children, cases have increased 34

percent since schools reopened in August. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis aggressively pushed for the reopening, even threatening to withhold funding if districts did not allow students back into classrooms.

In similar fashion, the letter is threatening audits, which would allow for state funding to be withheld. The funding schools need to retrofit and resolve safety issues is now being used to intimidate schools that have made the choice to remain remote and save lives. With the insinuating language of a mobster, Riley writes he is “concerned” that “the school committee has voted to keep most students learning remotely for the start of the school year.”

He warns explicitly: “Please note your response may trigger an audit to assess overall efforts to provide in-person instruction and to ensure your remote learning is consistent with 603 CMR 27.08 [the drive to prioritize in person classes].” DESE recommends remote learning only for municipalities receiving a “red designation *three weeks in a row* on the color-coded metric unless other extenuating circumstances that prevent in-person instruction” (emphasis added).

A “red” community is one that has eight or more positive cases per 100,000 people per day, yellow between four and eight, and green with less than four per day, meaning that a school should be engaging in in-person classes for three potentially explosive weeks of high community transmission before switching to remote learning. This is not a policy to prevent people from getting sick, it is a policy to let the virus spread for weeks while people inevitably become sick and die, and only then make any changes.

Workers and school community members understand that testing data is being manipulated and undercounted in an attempt to cover up the scale of the pandemic and herd people back to school. A teacher who works in one of the 16 districts that received the letter, who wished to remain anonymous, described the discrepancies in the data: “I watch the local news each night for numbers. They do a daily average percentage rate. One day this weekend, the state was way up. Later, they didn’t bother to report the daily percentage rate, so the average

weekly rate looked great! Data can be skewed to make things look peachy.”

This is certainly the case. Since private college testing has equaled or even overshadowed state testing, positivity rates have been artificially pushed down. Since students at many schools are being tested every two to three days, the results of testing thousands upon thousands of people who were two days prior negative and asymptomatic, as compared to the normal person tested by the state, most likely symptomatic, increases the relative likelihood that the result is negative. Since schools have been nearly out-testing the state, a false positivity rate has been generated, and is being used as a bulwark to push for reopening despite the rise in case numbers and deaths. In reality, the positivity rate for the first test given per individual has been increasing since the end of August, reaching a recent high of 2.5 percent. The lower and diluted positivity rate has been used by the *Boston Globe*, Governor Charlie Baker, and the letter sent by Riley, to justify the reopening.

The teacher we spoke with works in a low-income, working class district. When asked how she felt about returning to school, she bluntly stated she was “scared shitless. Students, though they try, struggle to distance. We have been verbally told our HVACs are fine, but there has been no official declaration made. The windows in the school only open 3 inches, and kids have to de-mask and eat in classrooms. My requests for plexiglass, N95 masks and temperature checks have all been ignored. I have a disease which affects my pulmonary system. If I get COVID, it won’t end well.”

Another teacher who also wished to remain anonymous and works in East Longmeadow, an upper-middle-class district, described different conditions. “The school board worked extensively over the summer to create painstaking plans with the interest of teachers and students in heart. All matters were considered, down to how students would walk through the halls. I thought we were going to do hybrid. It came as a surprise when we went fully remote.”

Both teachers, though, are certain that their districts cannot possibly come up with full-fledged plans in 10 days, especially when they are “under the gun.” Even in the wealthier district, the school had not yet “figured out exactly what to do with the cohort of students who would be online,” an obviously crucial part of any hybrid learning scheme. “To figure out how to go in person, we’d need to stop school for 10 days, and then maybe we could figure it out,” the teacher said.

The teacher from East Longmeadow spoke on the hazards of reopening. “If we reopen fully in person, the numbers will absolutely go up. The numbers are down in East Longmeadow because we’re fully remote. With hybrid, it might be ok if the safeguards work, but that’s a big if. The experts are all saying things are going to get worse before they get better. If our district forces people back to school, we are going to be part of that problem, and the whole thing will get shut down again. I think we all need to proceed with an abundance of caution.”

In a recent study published on Tuesday in the *Wall Street Journal*, researchers found that an extra 3,200 cases a day occurred in the US that likely wouldn’t have happened had colleges and universities stayed online. The opening of elementary and secondary education will undoubtedly add to this number additional thousands of cases per day.

“The pressure to reopen” said the East Longmeadow teacher, “is coming from people who have money. They’re looking at the schools as childcare. ‘If we can get the kids back to school, we can get the parents back to the workplace.’ But no one’s going into the office in those white-collar jobs, they don’t want to get sick!”

Putting it succinctly, the teacher from the poorer district described the entire policy of the ruling elite: “Money over lives.”

Teachers and students must understand that this is not a local phenomenon, nor the result of the personality or compassion or lack thereof of any number of political or union leaders. There is nothing unique to these districts in Massachusetts that precludes this cruel scenario from happening elsewhere. The drive back to school is part of a global process to open the economy at the behest of the financial aristocracy, and to generate the real value behind the trillions of dollars that were produced out of thin air and pumped, not into stopping the virus and funding education for these circumstances, but into the banks, large corporations and stock market.

These policies from above must be fought against to save lives! A class response organized independently from and in opposition to all organs of the ruling class is required. Union bureaucrats have divided working class opposition against the reopening of schools by district and industry and diverted it into the political dead end of Democrat Joe Biden’s presidential election campaign.

The Socialist Equality Party is forming rank-and-file safety committees to organize and fight back on behalf of workers, with committees already formed in New York, Los Angeles, Florida and Texas. We urge all teachers, school workers, students and parents in these 16 “low-risk” school districts in Massachusetts, and in districts across the country, to contact us today.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>