

Brooklyn, N.Y.: Protest hits unsafe reopening of public schools

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SLL photo: Greg Butterfield

On Sept. 21, the first group of students — special education students and pre-kindergarten children — attended in-person classes in New York City public schools for the first time since school buildings closed in late March due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

After school that day, teachers, other school workers, students and parents rallied to demand safe schools and call for remote-only schooling. The Movement Of Rank & File Educators (MORE-UFT), a social justice caucus of the United Federation of Teachers, called the action.

About 50 people picketed in front of the Department of Education in downtown Brooklyn before marching to nearby Borough Hall, where they occupied the steps, chanting “Money for schools, not for cops!” Soon after, they were joined by 100 educators and students who marched across the Brooklyn Bridge from Manhattan.

“This is a Black Lives Matter issue,” declared Dante, a student from Urban Assembly Maker Academy in lower Manhattan. “This is a funding issue.”

Students, teachers and parents spoke out about the awful conditions confronting many of the city’s underfunded public schools that make in-person classes dangerous — especially overcrowded facilities and woefully inadequate ventilation. With the city and state in a deep budget crisis, and Gov. Andrew Cuomo rejecting calls to tax the rich, no money is being provided to make the necessary changes.

Speakers explained how the rate of COVID-19 infection varies greatly neighborhood by neighborhood. Several areas of Brooklyn have seen recent spikes. Students and teachers commuting to school on public transportation threaten to increase community spread. Black and Brown New Yorkers have disproportionately been victims of the coronavirus.

Teachers, ordered to report in person even if they are teaching remote classes, have held daily protests outside their school buildings. Some have been working outside on playgrounds to demonstrate the lack of safety indoors. The city has rejected calls for mandatory weekly testing of all staff and students. By Sept. 23, [100 schools had at least one \(self-reported\) COVID-19 case](#) — before the bulk of the city's 1.1 million students even reported to class.

Cuomo, Mayor Bill de Blasio and Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza have lied repeatedly to city residents about the school system's preparedness, protesters charged. Much of the promised personal protective equipment, additional teachers and school nurses never materialized. The city has twice been forced to delay the reopening under pressure from teachers, administrators and families. Now, most students are scheduled to return to classrooms part time during the week of Sept. 28.

As more communities learn about the lack of necessary preparation for safe in-person classes, nearly 50 percent of families have opted for remote-only learning. But the city has also failed to provide adequate equipment (including laptops and tablets) and WiFi access for New York's many impoverished and homeless public school students, threatening to inflame already rampant educational inequality.

For daily updates on the struggle for safe schools in New York, visit [MoreCaucusNYC.org](https://www.morecaucusnyc.org).

