

NYC elementary schools reopen in big back-to-school test

September 29 2020, by Jennifer Peltz



In this Friday, Aug. 21, 2020, file photo, Maddison Washington, 11, stands at her bedroom mirror as she gets ready for her virtual graduation from her Brooklyn middle school, in the Brooklyn borough of New York. After being delayed twice, hundreds of thousands of elementary school students are heading back to classrooms Tuesday, Sept. 29 as New York City enters a high-stakes phase of resuming in-person learning during the coronavirus pandemic. (AP Photo/Jessie Wardarski, File)

Hundreds of thousands of elementary school students are heading back to classrooms this week as New York City enters a high-stakes stage of resuming in-person learning during the coronavirus pandemic, which is keeping students at home in many other big U.S. school systems.

Twice delayed, the elementary school reopening on Tuesday came over spurts in virus cases in some city neighborhoods after a summer of success at keeping transmission fairly stable in the city as a whole.

"It's a big moment for the city," Mayor Bill de Blasio said on cable news station NY1 Monday night. With in-person learning for middle and high school students scheduled to begin Thursday, he noted, "as many as half a million kids could be in school in the course of this week."

With over 1 million public school students, New York City initially had a more ambitious timeline than many other big U.S. school systems for bringing children back to schoolhouses this fall. Families have the option of choosing all-remote learning, and a growing number are doing so—48% as of Friday, up from 30% six weeks earlier, according to city Education Department statistics.

Other students are already back in the city's virus-altered version of in-person school, learning sometimes in classrooms and sometimes at home.

Pre-kindergarteners and some special education students began showing up Sept. 21 as online instruction began for the rest of the student body.



This photo from Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020, file photo, School Chancellor Richard Carranza, left, and Mayor Bill de Blasio, are seen during an inspection of health safeguard protocols for COVID-19 at Bronx Collaborative High School in New York. After being delayed twice, hundreds of thousands of elementary school students are heading back to classrooms Tuesday, Sept. 29 with in-person learning for middle and high school students scheduled to begin Thursday. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews, File)

Tuesday was the first day of in-person learning for students in the first through fifth grades whose families had chosen the hybrid learning plan, while high some school and middle school students are slated to be back in classrooms starting Thursday.

Sonam Zompa was excited for her 7-year-old son to go back to his elementary school on Manhattan's Lower East Side—and so was he. The

third-grader, Tenzin Topdhen, said he liked his online classes but missed his friends—and in school, "we have actual recess."

Students were originally due back Sept. 10. But the start date was pushed back, repeatedly, after the city teachers' union said it wasn't safe to open schools because of outdated ventilation systems, an insufficient number of school nurses and other issues. At one point, the United Federation of Teachers threatened to strike.

The union was still pressing for changes as recently as Friday, when the city agreed to let more teachers work from home when instructing students remotely, rather than having to come in to school to conduct online classes.



In this Monday, Sept. 21, 2020, file photo, Maria Flores kisses her son Pedro Garcia, 4, while a teacher takes his hand as he arrives for the first day of school

at the Mosaic Pre-K Center in the Queens borough of New York. While pre-kindergarteners and some special education students are already back in school, hundreds of thousands of elementary school students are heading back to classrooms Tuesday, Sept. 29 in New York City after twice delayed during the coronavirus pandemic. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, File)



In this Sept. 9, 2020, file photo, students wear protective masks due to COVID-19 as they arrive for classes at the Immaculate Conception in The Bronx borough of New York. After being delayed twice, hundreds of thousands of elementary public school students are heading back to classrooms Tuesday, Sept. 29 as New York City enters a high-stakes phase of resuming in-person learning during the coronavirus pandemic. (AP Photo/John Minchillo, File)

The principals' union said the late-breaking change was too much. Principals had already complained that the city was creating a staffing crunch by planning to have three different groups of teachers—one for all-remote students, another for in-classroom pupils and a third for blended-program students when they're at home.

Saying that de Blasio and Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza "have entered into grossly irresponsible staffing agreements," the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators called Sunday for the state to take control of the school system for the duration of the pandemic.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Monday that he understood the concern of the principals' union and that the state would monitor virus testing data to determine whether any steps need to be taken concerning New York City schools.

Both Cuomo and de Blasio are Democrats.

Many other big school systems around the country began the fall term online, though some are reopening physical schools. In Florida, for instance, students opting for in-person learning returned to schools Sept. 21 in Palm Beach County, where the nation's 10th largest school system has over 197,000 students.

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