

Death of Arizona teacher exposes lies about safely reopening schools

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The tragic death of Arizona schoolteacher Kimberley Chavez Lopez Byrd from COVID-19 has exposed the dangers of the rush to reopen schools across the United States while the pandemic continues to rage. The 61-year-old first grade teacher from Hayden-Winkelman Unified School District, a small rural district southeast of Phoenix, died on June 26, less than two weeks after being hospitalized for the infection.

Byrd and two other teachers apparently contracted the disease while they were providing remote instruction to summer school students from the same classroom. The three teachers had taken precautions, however, including wearing masks, social distancing, sanitizing the room and only speaking one at a time. The two other teachers, Jena Martinez-Inzunza and Angela Skillings, are still recovering.

Byrd, who reportedly had asthma and other health problems, was initially told by her doctor that she had a sinus infection. When she was finally diagnosed after a camping trip with her husband and admitted to the hospital, she ended up on a ventilator for 12 days before succumbing to the disease. Byrd is survived by her husband Jesse Byrd, Sr. and their blended family.

Byrd told local news media that his wife was admitted to the hospital and immediately put on oxygen and that he was not allowed to be with her. The last time they spoke was when she called to say doctors were putting her on a ventilator. She died just short of the couple's 24th wedding anniversary.

Arizona reported 4,273 new COVID-19 cases and 92 deaths Tuesday, bringing its total to 128,097 cases and 2,337 fatalities. The four zip codes in and around the small communities of Hayden and Winkelman—an area that includes the copper mining and smelting industry—have about 50 cases, according to Arizona Department of Health Services data. Jesse Byrd's

daughter, son, daughter-in-law, four-year-old granddaughter and several other relatives have also contracted the disease, while his wife's brother has been on a ventilator for over 27 days.

Kimberly Byrd worked for the school district for 38 years, so long, as one local newspaper noted, that she started teaching the children of her former students. Co-workers described Byrd, who retired but returned to teach, as selfless. She and the other two teachers dropped off seed packets at each student's home so the class could grow plants together as part of their virtual summer school course. She also taught art and folklórico dance to her first graders.

"A lot of her classroom rules were based around kids respecting each other and being kind to each other and not bullying," Jesse Byrd told CNN about his wife. "That was really important to her."

Byrd denounced the state's plans to reopen schools in mid-August. "They have no business opening the schools to try and get back to a traditional classroom," he said, adding, "let's get through this pandemic first before we try to get back to normal." Other families should not have to suffer a similar tragedy, he said. "Many grandparents wind up being caretakers to kids when they get off school—mom and dad are working and a lot of grandparents are even raising their grandchildren. So, many of these grandparents fall into this high-risk category of being older with more health issues," he said.

Hayden-Winkelman school superintendent Jeff Gregorich told CNN the "concern our staff has is we can't even keep our staff safe by themselves ... how are we going to keep 20 kids in a classroom safe? I just don't see how that's possible to do that." He told *USA Today*, "We're going to lose a lot of teachers if they bring kids back again. The learning can be made up, but

the lives will never be brought back.”

Byrd’s fellow teacher, Martinez-Inzunza, denounced Trump’s threats to cut off federal funding from school districts that do not reopen. “Everything is safety, safety, safety,” she told Arizona Central. “What a contradiction to be threatened by the president. What a contradiction to be bullied: ‘Do this, or I’m going to pull funding.’ What a contradiction to say our kids’ lives matter. Why would you push to open schools?”

Byrd’s other fellow teacher, Skillings, told CNN “Children that like to touch things, like to share—they’re socializing. What are we going to do to them emotionally if they take that virus home and give it to a family member or daycare worker or someone they are close to and that person passes away?”

In a White House press briefing on Monday a reporter asked President Trump, “What do you tell parents, who look at this, who look at Arizona where a school teacher recently died teaching summer school, parents who are worried about the safety of their children in public schools?”

Trump made no reference to Byrd, saying instead, “Schools should be opened. Those kids want to go to school. You’re losing a lot of lives by keeping things closed. We saved millions of lives while we did the initial closure.”

Arizona has one of the earliest scheduled new school years in the country. The state’s 1.1 million students, 48,000 teachers and tens of thousands of support staff members were originally scheduled to start on August 3, but this was pushed back to August 17. On Tuesday, more than 100 school board members from across the state and 1,000 health care workers and education advocates delivered a letter to Governor Doug Ducey urging him to postpone the reopening of the schools until at least October.

Commenting on the death of Byrd, Lori, a Phoenix area teacher, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “That was awful and tragic. She was just doing her job. We’re all trying to help the kids the best we can. I have asthma and diabetes like Kimberly did—that could have been me. It broke my heart to realize that she sacrificed her life to get these kids an education. The teachers all took precautions, but they still got it.

“Trump, DeVos, Ducey, they all know this virus is killing people, but they are willing to sentence these children and these teachers to death. They don’t care.

They’re saying, ‘Let’s reopen the schools so we can get their parents back to work making money for the rich corporations.’ That makes me angry.

“These politicians claim they have the best interests of children at heart. They are nothing but hypocrites. They’ve taken away funds from the schools for years, taking programs away from children that are vital.”

Governor Ducey is the multimillionaire former owner of the Cold Stone ice cream chain who just sold his private mansion in Paradise Valley, Arizona for \$8 million.

“They don’t care about these kids’ education,” Lori continued, “all they care about is giving more tax cuts to big business. We had to go on strike in 2018 because Ducey and the state legislature refused to fund public education. We fought for janitors, cafeteria workers, everybody, but the unions sold us out and we didn’t get what we wanted. The unions tell us to vote for the Democrats, but they are for big business just like the Republicans.”

Lori continued, “The politicians want to turn black against white and native born against immigrant, but that’s not the issue, it’s about the haves and the have-nots. They are getting rid of lives for the sake of wealth. They don’t care about the elderly in the nursing homes because the rich consider them a burden on society. Now they want to kill or force out older, more experienced teachers and replace us with lower-paid, inexperienced teachers who don’t know how much public education has deteriorated, how the schools used to be, and what we have to fight for now.”

Asked about a national strike by teachers to oppose the rush to reopen the schools, Lori said, “If everybody refused and just said, ‘Sorry, we are not going to do it,’ then we could prevent this madness. We need to unite to fight for the things that are important.”



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