“It is really up to the teachers to take their safety into their own hands.”

One-third of schools in Knox County, Tennessee have at least one positive COVID-19 case

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Schools in Knox County, Tennessee, which includes the city of Knoxville, concluded their third week of school last week with over one-third of schools in the district having reported a positive case of COVID-19. Across the county, 31 of 88 schools have at least one confirmed COVID-19 case.

The growing spread of the deadly virus is the direct outcome of the “herd immunity” policies that have been pursued by every level of government in the US from the Trump administration down to the local Board of Education in the county.

The public health protocols in the county mandate that principals of individual schools contact staff and parents after a confirmed case of COVID-19. The schools then collaborate with public health officials to conduct contact tracing, and anyone that has been within six feet of someone infected with COVID-19 for 15 minutes or longer is required to quarantine for two weeks.

Within the last few weeks, Knox County Health Department has reported some of the largest daily increases in COVID-19 cases in the country since the start of the pandemic. The department reported 222 new cases on September 6, 219 new cases on September 15 and 189 new cases on September 12.

According to the Knox County School website, as of September 15 there are 50 active COVID-19 cases associated with the school district, including 39 students and 11 staff members. In a reflection of the failure to implement adequate social distancing measures within the schools, 917 students and 69 staff members were in isolation or quarantine on the same day.

Prior to the school year resuming, over a hundred teachers in the county refused to return to in-person instruction, opting to either retire or resign from their positions. By early July, over 18,000 students—roughly 30 percent of the 59,235 total enrollment—were registered for virtual learning.

Last week, the Knox County School Board announced that they were in need of more substitute teachers in order to continue with in-person classes. The school board has acknowledged that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the district had been experiencing a shortage of substitute teachers, and that the situation has worsened as a result of staff needing to be quarantined.

The Executive Director of Human Resources at Knox County Schools, Scott Bolton, stated last week, “We’re seeing issues because of contact tracing or people having to quarantine. We’re having to fill those vacancies. Now, while staff members are quarantined, they’re still providing remote instruction into the classroom. However, the issue is we need someone in that particular classroom to monitor students and to assist with any kind of technology, and that’s what we use our subs for in that scenario.”

The school district has 25 openings that need to be filled immediately, and has created a new position titled, “traveling teaching assistant,” whose role as described by Bolton is to act as an in-person babysitter while instruction is provided remotely by a quarantined teacher.

Despite multiple protests by teachers and concerned parents in Knox County held over the summer to demand the district switch to remote learning, including a car rally

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organized by teachers last Wednesday, the Knox County Board of Education remains intransigent that schools must stay open for in-person instruction. The school board insists that schools will only go virtual if there is a major COVID-19 outbreak or there are not enough substitute teachers to cover all absences.

In public statements last month, Tennessee's Republican Governor Bill Lee punted the decision on whether districts would reopen to local school boards, which has become the haphazard and chaotic standard for each of the nearly 14,000 school districts across the country.

Following the lead of the Trump administration, Lee also empowered districts to designate teachers and school administrators as "essential workers," enabling them to force teachers to work even if they have been exposed to COVID-19, unless they show symptoms or have tested positive. At least six districts in the state have designated teachers as "essential workers."

A teacher in Knox County, who wished to remain anonymous, told the WSWS, "It would be impossible to have social distancing in the schools, especially if they ever moved totally away from virtual learning. I am talking to teachers that are running remote classes with 36 students. If the district changes to in-person classes, there would not be a classroom at her school that could have 36 students with social distancing.

"We don't have enough janitors to sanitize every class. Now teachers are supposed to teach, provide social and emotional counseling, and practically be a school nurse during the pandemic.

"At the same time they are constantly giving us more work. We had to do a mandatory unpaid training this summer, which a lot of teachers said was not helpful. Now they are saying that we have to work as subs during our planning periods.

"Governor Lee is claiming that he is helping, and providing us with PPE. The only thing they sent me was a mask made of the same material as a tube sock, and a role of paper towels."

Leigh, a parent in Knox County, said, "They are keeping everything from us. We just get emails and sometimes the email says 'case' and sometimes it says 'cases,' and that is about all the information we get. Why have all the smoke and mirrors? Why not just tell us how many cases are in every school?

"We are told that the schools will go all virtual if over 10 percent are infected. But how many students or teachers would die if that happens? This is, also, a new virus, and we don't know the long-term impact of the virus."

Asked if there was pressure to send her kids to in-person classes, Leigh added, "My son and daughter are both doing virtual learning. My daughter is taking AP classes and is in an advanced program, where some of the classes go for two years. When we were registering them for remote learning the schools were saying that they were unsure about which classes were being offered.

"They also wanted me to sign a form about taking my son to do in-person standardized testing. These tests are part of his grade, but I am not taking him to do in-person tests and risk getting sick. I am hoping all the parents refuse to take their kids.

"My husband is a teacher and I know the schools are not taking safety precautions. We had to make a baby registry on Amazon and filled it with safety supplies. We had to get all our supplies with the help of our friends and family, and I know other teachers that all did the same thing.

"It is really up to the teachers to take their safety into their own hands. It is clear the politicians don't care about us. Lee promised a 4 percent raise for teachers and then took it away."

The reckless reopening of schools is the bipartisan policy being pursued throughout the US. While Republican Governor Lee continues to recklessly endanger the lives of teachers and students by keeping schools open, Democrat-controlled states like New York and California are moving forward with the reopening of schools as the COVID-19 pandemic deepens.

Educators, parents and students that want to take a stand against unsafe conditions in schools must build rank-and-file safety committees in their area. We urge all those opposed to unsafe school reopenings to join our Facebook page *and contact us today.*

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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