

Casualties of “herd immunity”: Three new teacher deaths in one week as US schools reopen

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As school districts across the US push forward with in-person learning in K-12 schools, the death toll of teachers and other educators from COVID-19 continues to rise.

These tragic deaths are absolutely preventable. School workers are the victims of a deadly bipartisan policy of “herd immunity”—that is, allowing the virus to spread without restraint, come what may. This policy has been spearheaded by the Trump administration, as revealed in the tapes released by Bob Woodward that prove Trump deliberately downplayed the threat of the virus and lied to the population.

However, this homicidal policy has the full support of the Democratic Party, which has done everything in its power to reopen schools in districts around the country, most notably in New York City, where Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio and Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo are working to start up in-person classes in the nation's largest school district, against fierce resistance from teachers, students and parents.

As a direct result of these criminal actions, three new educator deaths were reported in the last week alone, and a fourth teacher is currently fighting for her life in an intensive care unit. These preventable deaths mark only the beginning of what will become a flood of such reports, barring the independent intervention of educators, parents and students to force the closure of the schools.

Wisconsin

On Thursday, Heidi Hussli, a teacher at Bay Port High School in Wisconsin, died in the early morning hours. She was just 47 years old. By noon on Thursday, Bay Port was reporting nine positive cases of COVID-19, eight involving students. Eight staff and 31 students were under quarantine.

Hussli is survived by her husband and son. Statements of support and grievance have flooded social media and local news outlets from former students and loved ones. “She loved German culture so much,” said Amber Viegut, a Bay Port English teacher, to the *Green Bay Press Gazette*.

“She took dozens of kids, including our principal's son, to Germany,” Viegut said. “She made countless trips to Chicago to

the Christmas market. She led amazing cultural events at the school, too. My favorite memory is her yearly dress-up for Oktoberfest.”

Brown County has seen a surge in the number of positive cases in September. In the last seven days, 837 positive cases were reported out of 3,429 people tested, for a 24.4 percent positive rate. The two-week positive rate is 24.7 percent, with 1,463 positive cases out of 5,919 people tested. Fifty-nine deaths in Brown County have been related to COVID-19.

Kentucky

Pamela Harris, a counselor at Fort Knox Middle High School, located on the military base that is about 40 miles southwest of Louisville, died this week after contracting COVID-19, according to the association that represents educators and staff at schools operated by the US Department of Defense.

Officials would admit only that it is “possible” that Pamela Harris contracted the virus while at her school. The first day of school for K-12 students at Fort Knox was August 24. About 1,550 students from prekindergarten through 12th grade attend the four schools located on the Army base. “Fort Knox schools switched to remote learning in early September, but only after Ms. Harris and several other school employees reported COVID symptoms,” the Federal Education Association said in the news release.

Kentucky has seen over 58,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 1,093 deaths since March.

Hawaii

Dayna Inouye, 49, a school clerk at Dole Middle School in Hawaii, died last Wednesday of the virus. Inouye is from a family of school teachers. She leaves behind three daughters and her partner of 27 years.

Her sister, Angie Choi, a school counselor at Dole Middle

School, submitted testimony to the Hawaii State Board of Education Wednesday asking them, on behalf of her late sister, to end in-person learning during the pandemic.

Choi said the two sisters had both worked at Dole Middle School for five years, and, before that, they worked together at Niu Valley Middle School. “We were extremely close,” Choi told the Hawaii State Teachers Association (HSTA) in an interview. “She would greet staff and students at the school with a smile that made you feel welcome,” Choi said. “She was very calm and happy-go-lucky.”

Choi also reported that the Hawaii State Department of Health (DoH) was slow to respond to the outbreak at the school, which affected at least four staff and a student. Choi reported that State Schools Superintendent Christina Kishimoto admitted that DoH contact tracers took days to respond to the Dole cases.

In her testimony, Choi said she was certain that her sister had contracted the virus from school and outlined the sequence of events in great detail. She wrote in her testimony: “I can only imagine the worry she had when she received her positive results. No DoH called to inform, nor any tracing.”

Inouye’s daughter, Cameron Inouye-Ng, is also a teacher. She sent the following message to the HSTA:

“I am a 5th grade teacher at Makalapa Elementary School. My mother was very prepared for this pandemic, she bought everything that we needed for us to be safe. She was prepared as anyone could be. I know this will be difficult to prove, but there is no doubt in my mind that my mom caught COVID from work... Thinking about returning to campus in a few weeks scares me knowing that someone there might be feeling sick and could be asymptomatic. What if I were to get sick? What would happen to my family again? What would happen to my co-workers? What would happen to students if they are back in the classroom? I am requesting that teachers can telework for their safety and well-being during this tough time.”

Nearly 200 of Inouye’s fellow teachers and educators spoke out on the conditions they face at schools at a local school board meeting held online and partially made public in the aftermath of Inouye’s tragic death. More than 100 gave written testimony, which has been compiled by the HSTA and is publicly available.

Utah

A fourth teacher, Charri Jensen, known lovingly as “Mama J” by her students, is in critical condition in an intensive care unit due to COVID-19. Jensen is a teacher at Corner Canyon High School in Draper, Utah.

“She loves Corner Canyon more than anyone I know,” her daughter, Talesha Jensen, told KSL TV. “I mean, not even just Corner Canyon; she just has the biggest heart.”

Corner Canyon is now leading the state with 42 confirmed cases and more than 500 students and faculty members under quarantine.

Every piece of credible science that has emerged since the onset of the pandemic points to the same conclusion: the reopening of

schools for in-person learning will lead to more infections, more hospitalizations and more deaths. In fact, on Wednesday new data was released in Florida showing that pediatric cases and hospitalizations have seen a 20 percent spike since classrooms reopened in the state.

According to new state data, more than 12,000 Florida children 17 and under have been infected with COVID-19 since schools first began opening their doors. The pediatric cases since August 10 represent a 20 percent increase, and pediatric hospitalizations also jumped almost 20 percent over the same period.

Unsurprisingly, Florida school officials are denying any connection. Dr. Danielle Thomas with the Florida Parent Teacher Association (PTA) said in a recent public statement that it was “difficult” to draw any hard conclusions from the numbers. “In some of those cases the district has said that it’s not attributed to students being back at school,” she said. Florida Education Association President Andrew Spar said the problem is that it’s “impossible” to tell how many are directly related to school reopening.

Despite the hemming and hawing of these representatives of the political establishment, teachers, students and workers more broadly largely understand the truth: the deaths of Inouye, Harris and Hussli, like the 250 or more educators who died before them, were preventable. They are the direct result of criminal policies carried out by Democratic and Republican politicians at every level, motivated primarily by the need to protect the profits of the financial oligarchy.

Educators, along with workers, students and their families and loved ones, are being sacrificed in the interests of Wall Street. For this bloodbath to be stopped, the working class must intervene with its own organizations of struggle. This fight is already well underway.

Teachers and other school workers have taken the critical of forming a network of nationally coordinated Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees to organize the immense opposition to the deadly school reopenings. They have already formed committees in Florida, Texas, Michigan and New York. These committees are committed to the principle that even one death is one too many.

We urge all those who seek to wage a genuine struggle to close schools and save lives to contact us today, join the discussion on our Facebook page, and register for this Saturday’s online meeting.



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