

“Everyone I work with thinks that it is absurd to put us all in harm’s way”

## Tennessee parents and educators speak out against unsafe school openings

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Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site Educators Newsletter* have recently been in discussion with parents and teachers in Tennessee about the reckless reopening of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The teachers and parents often shared similar complaints about the unsafe conditions in schools and pressure to accept the reopening policies.

As of this writing, the Tennessee Department of Education has reported 655 COVID-19 cases related to schools, with 453 students and 202 staff members testing positive. However, the number of cases is likely an underestimate of the spread of the virus throughout the school system, as there have been efforts to suppress information about outbreaks in order to tamp down opposition.

Prior to schools reopening in late August, the Tennessee Department of Health reported 2,000 new COVID-19 cases among children ages five to eighteen between August 4 and August 18. Despite the clear danger of the disease spreading, Tennessee’s Republican Governor Bill Lee announced that it would be up to local school districts to determine how to reopen, knowing full well the majority of boards of education would allow for some form of in-person instruction.

Current and former teachers and parents shared their thoughts and experiences about the reopening of schools with the *WSWS Educators Newsletter*. The names of teachers have been omitted to avoid retaliation from the administration. We encourage teachers and parents throughout the US and internationally to contact us in order to speak out about

the conditions at your schools, and to attend today’s meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to learn more about the fight against the unsafe return to in-person classes.

A former teacher in the Nashville area, who has resigned and is currently working as a tutor, told the WSWS: “It was not like I left thinking of tutoring. It was the anxiety of being back in the building; it was more and more talking about virtual teaching. I just decided this was not going to be a good situation for me. I am already disenchanted with the public school system, and now there were all the things they wanted you to do. They called it ‘different platforms.’ Every day there were all these issues and it was too stressful for me to teach. It was just like a big, hot mess.”

She added, “They had months and months over summer, and they put all of their money into teaching virtually instead of figuring out how can you come to school safely, but now they don’t have the money to make it safe to go back.”

In recent years, parents and teachers have complained about building maintenance, which has become a life-and-death issue with COVID-19.

The former Nashville teacher commented: “They were constantly in there repairing heating and air-conditioning units and you can’t open windows because of safety issues so you can’t get ventilation from the outside. You can’t crack open a window, and then you have these long wall units and the air isn’t circulating well. A lot of the schools are in terrible condition; they had that musty, moldy, mildew kind of smell. Even with 18 students you can’t socially

distance at all as is recommended.”

A teacher in East Tennessee, who was hired for a remote position, explained, “I was hired for virtual teaching, and they told me and everyone in this position that we would be working from home. For the first three weeks of school we all did work at home. Then they changed the policy and we all had to report to a local middle school and work in cubicles to teach.

“I don’t think that the school administration will keep us safe, and all the other teachers that I work with feel the same way. In my district there was a delay in opening the schools, but I don’t even think that had to do with safety. My guess is that they just delayed opening because they needed more time to get the remote instruction set up.

“Now everyone I work with thinks that it is absurd to put us all in harm’s way, since we all could do this job safely from home. Why have us risk our health by coming in to work? If there was an issue having us work from home, why were we allowed to work from home for the first three weeks?

“The administration has kept us completely in the dark about the change in policy. They have not even said if the policy was changed by the district or the principal of the school. I feel like the district in general is just saying ‘we know what is good for your health, and you don’t. So, just do what we tell you.’”

In the course of the discussion, the East Tennessee teacher denounced the reopening as poorly planned, with little backup in the event that a teacher became seriously ill during the pandemic. He explained: “If I come into contact with COVID, I am supposed to quarantine and teach from home. I have a few days of backup lessons in case I’m sick, but that’s it. If I’m unable to teach my class, who does it? The substitutes are not in training to use the remote platform. I developed my own lesson plan for the course, so who could fill this role?”

Cassie, a parent in Tennessee, stated, “My husband and I are high risk and have four children under age nine at home. If we follow CDC guidelines for close-quarters caregivers, we have to keep all the kids home.

“My two kids in class have RAD [Reactive Airway Disease]. One went in for AIMSweb placement testing one-on-one with his teacher yesterday. My other child goes in next week. I almost didn’t send them, but our school doesn’t have any cases yet, and they are

wearing masks and using their own pencils. The teachers know our reasons for homeschooling.”

Cassie expressed that having grown up within the same school district, there is “no way” that she would put faith in schools to close in response to COVID-19 cases. She further voiced her opposition to the drive of businesses to reopen schools and get parents back to work, stating, “It’s high time that employers in our country see their employees as people with families instead of hours on a timesheet. Employers have to fill this gap; it’s not on the schools to supervise students, not anymore.”



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