

“It’s not safe to have students in the classroom”

Arizona teacher speaks on the death of her colleague from COVID-19 and contracting the virus herself

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The WSWs spoke with Angela Skillings, a second grade teacher in Winkelman, Arizona, who was one of three teachers sharing a room who all contracted COVID-19 in June while teaching virtual summer school. Skillings and her colleagues Kim Byrd and Jena Martinez-Inzunza, along with their families, became infected. Byrd tragically succumbed to the virus in June. Ever since, Skillings has strongly advocated for schools to remain closed until the pandemic is contained.

Skillings has been teaching for 17 years, and this August began her 14th year at Hayden-Winkelman Unified School District. She teaches second grade at Leonor Hambly K-8 school, one of two schools in the district in Winkelman, Arizona, a small town southeast of Phoenix. The district serves about 300 K-12 students from Winkelman and surrounding communities.

Skillings, Byrd, and Martinez-Inzunza were in a K-2 grade level band and began teaching students virtually from their school site on June 8. The teachers shared a classroom and worked together each morning for the first week. Skillings described how she and her coworkers were hyper-diligent about staying safe, maintained well over six feet of distancing, wore masks, and religiously washed and sanitized their hands. On June 14, Skillings was notified that Kim Byrd was taken to the hospital, put on a ventilator and later that evening tested positive for COVID-19.

Two days later, Skillings started showing symptoms of COVID-19, and Martinez-Inzunza followed suit the next day. Skillings would then receive a positive test result on Thursday, June 18, and Martinez-Inzunza tested positive on Tuesday, June 23. During the second week of summer school, both Skillings and Martinez-Inzunza continued teaching from home despite feeling terribly ill from the virus.

Skillings described this experience, saying, “I texted my colleague saying ‘I feel like death has hit me.’ But we still pushed through it because we had students sitting in front of us. That’s what teachers do, we have always sacrificed for our students. It was the hardest four days, knowing Kim was already on the ventilator and she had tested positive, and we were sick. Our students had made get-well cards for her, the parents would send us pictures that we sent to Kim’s husband... Little did we know she wasn’t going to survive.”

After Byrd’s death, her entire family tested positive for the virus, including her two-year-old granddaughter. Her brother, Roy Chavez, a substitute teacher in a neighboring school district, would also die three

weeks later. A staggering nine out of the total 60 staff members in the district had contracted the virus in June and July, prior to kids showing up on campus.

Three months have passed since Byrd’s tragic death, and hundreds of teachers and students across the US have now lost their lives to COVID-19 in the seven months since the onset of the pandemic. Arizona has reported a total of 219,763 cases and 5,693 deaths. There have been multiple outbreaks at schools since they began reopening in August throughout the state, leading to temporary school shutdowns and quarantines of students and staff. Last week, the entire varsity football team at Cactus Shadows High School in Cave Creek was placed under quarantine after four of its players tested positive for COVID-19.

Naturally, the experience has turned Skillings into an ardent fighter against school reopenings and the right of all to work from home. “Since July, my colleagues and I have been telling people this is what is going to happen,” she said.

Referring to the downplaying of the virus’ impact on children and the criminal alteration of CDC guidelines, which were relaxed to facilitate the bipartisan campaign to reopen schools, Skillings noted, “The quarantine rules changed while I was in quarantine. I wasn’t going to leave my house until I tested negative, but under the new quarantine guidelines from the CDC, I could’ve left my house on day ten if I didn’t have a cough or a fever. When I first tested positive, it was nine days later until I started running a fever. If I were to follow the CDC guidelines, I would’ve been out before July 1st and when I tested July 1st, I was positive. The guidelines just got too easy.”

Students from various communities in the Gila and Pinal counties attend the Hayden-Winkelman School District—an area which includes the copper mining and smelting industry. These small communities such as Winkelman have been hit hard by COVID-19. As of October 2, there have been 12,110 reported cases and 268 cumulative deaths in Gila and Pinal counties alone.

Like many throughout the US, the Hayden-Winkelman School District is already underfunded. Skillings noted that hers is a Title I school, with 84 percent of its student population receiving free or reduced-price lunches. “A lot of our students are with grandparents because their parents are essential workers. I’ve heard parents say they will be getting rid of a cell phone payment because Mom or Dad is going to stay at home with their child,” she said.

Skills commented on the 2018 wildcat teachers strike, saying Arizona now that in our state we are seeing numbers which she and her colleagues participated in, and which was isolated and betrayed by the Arizona Education Association and Arizona Educators United. “Sure we got a raise, but my paycheck was less because our insurance almost doubled. The insurance company wasn’t stupid, they said, ‘hey, they are getting more money, now lets charge them more.’ We didn’t get our raises the way the governor said he was going to give them.”

Skills herself works a second job at a local convenience store to help supplement her family’s income. She spoke to the economic conditions in the town and within the context of one of its main employers—Asarco, a mining, smelting and refining company—which shut down production this month.

“I can’t say anyone here is affluent, there are no rich kids,” Skillings noted, adding, “most of the parents worked for the local mine. They went on strike in October of last year. The strike is over because the union pretty much just said ‘OK we are done’ in August. They are closing the company. We have a smelter here in town, you can see it from my classroom. They are closing that as of October 1. So a lot of our parents have had to find jobs somewhere else.

“[Asarco] laid off all their supervisors. My dad’s last day of work was October 1, and they only brought back one third of the union members that went on strike. My dad had COVID-19 in April from going on vacation. He hasn’t been able to go back to work because he has lung damage. They had informed him back in August that he would be laid off September 30, so he just put in his retirement notice.”

Asarco copper miners bravely struck in 2019 and were engaged in a bitter ten month struggle which was betrayed by the United Steelworkers, Teamsters and the five other unions which closed down picket lines and ordered the 1,800 striking miners to accept any job offered by the company, or risk losing their unemployment benefits and any recall rights.

The Asarco mining company was one of the main employers in Winkelman, and tax revenues from the corporation partially funded the school district. The closure of the smelter will not only have implications for the funding of the school district but is going to have a devastating and long-lasting effect on the community.

Feigning concern for vulnerable students, Arizona Governor Doug Ducey proclaimed that starting August 17, schools must open up for students of need or else lose roughly five percent of their state funding. Skills district initially decided to reject the proclamation because they opposed having students on campus, but the loss of the mine was used as a bludgeon to open the doors despite the overwhelming desire of educators that the district remain closed.

“Our district decided we would eat [the money] because we were not going to have students on campus. Our principal, superintendent, myself and others had advocated it is not safe to have students on campus. We figured we have taught with less before and could make it work, but Asarco notified us that they were shutting down the smelter as of October 1, which means our budget is going to take a major hit.”

Significantly, despite the opening, not a single parent sent their child to in-person instruction on August 17 in response to the death of Byrd, growing infections, and the opposition among teachers and staff. The school technically remains open, but teachers are providing virtual instruction from their classrooms and as of now there are only seven students on campus.

Skills stressed the need to keep schools closed until the virus is

contained, saying Arizona now that in our state we are seeing numbers decline, but my question is: what is your positivity rate? Our governor says it should be five percent or below, but to me that is still pretty high. If you look at our numbers, in six months 200,000 people died. We need to think of the safety and health and welfare of not just the students and the staff, but the parents and everybody that they come into contact with. Just putting kids into the classroom, even in a hybrid model, they are still interacting with one another and passing germs back and forth.

“I guarantee you if Johnny came to school with pink-eye, everyone in the class will have pink-eye in the next week. It’s the same way with COVID-19, especially with so many asymptomatic cases in people. They can still transfer it. One student is all it takes, that student is going to guaranteed to touch at least five more students and take it home. To me, until we have this virus under control and we are not seeing numbers climb at all, it is not safe to have students in the classroom.

“Are we trying to kill people off? Is that really what we are trying to do? Because if we did herd immunity the way our president is taking it, where we make sure 35 or 80 percent of the people get the virus, with our numbers already, you’re talking two million people, two million Americans are going to die! It doesn’t make sense to me. Why? One death is enough! I just got off the phone with Kim Byrd’s husband who said, ‘Teachers for years have sacrificed their money and time for students and now the government wants them to sacrifice their lives.’”

Skills also expressed the emotional toll the pandemic is having on her students and youth, asking, “How are kids going to feel if they know they were sick and grandma died from it because they got grandma sick? It’s an emotional time. The day Kim died I had a parent call me. Kim was her daughter’s teacher for two years, the following year this child became my second-grader.

“The little girl kept crying, ‘I don’t want Ms. Skills to die, I don’t want her to die too.’ I said, ‘look baby I’m okay. Don’t worry. I’m not promising you anything, but, I’m feeling great.’ I had to push through my grief and put on the teacher hat. I had to calm this child down and make her understand that I was doing well, even though at the time I was very sick and not sure how much more I could take.”

From the 2018 Arizona wildcat teacher strike, to the Asarco miners strike, to the fight by Arizona teachers and those across the country to close schools and stop the spread of the pandemic, the WSWS has called for educators to build rank-and-file committees independently of the unions and both big business parties, in order to fight for their lives and their livelihoods. The need for such organs of struggle is now a life-and-death question, and is being taken up by educators across the US and internationally. We urge all teachers, school workers, parents and students to build these committees, and contact us today to get involved.



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