

“They want the schools to remain open at all costs”

Tennessee educator speaks out on unsafe conditions in schools

Our reporters
7 October 2020

Following the recent comments made by Tennessee’s Republican governor, Bill Lee, in which he praised the “very strong safety measures” in place for in-person classes during the pandemic, an educator in Rutherford County, Tennessee, has spoken to the *World Socialist Web Site* and revealed the reality of conditions she and her colleagues are facing.

Rutherford County is one of the fastest growing counties in Tennessee, in part due to the soaring housing costs in nearby Davidson County (Nashville), with the number of residents rising from 262,604 residents in 2010 to an estimated 332,285 in 2019, according to US Census data. Murfreesboro, the county seat, is “Tennessee’s fastest growing major city and one of the fastest growing cities in the country,” according to Homesnacks.com. It is the home of the state’s second-largest university, Middle Tennessee State University, with nearly 20,000 undergraduate students.

The Rutherford County school district has 46,303 students, while Murfreesboro city schools have 9,000 students. Shortly after Rutherford County reopened its schools, some 1,500 students were quarantined due to COVID-19 symptoms or having been exposed to someone infected with the virus. Despite this, the county has refused to move entirely to online learning.

Describing the situation, the teacher commented: “It is clear that they [politicians and school administrators] want the schools to remain open at all costs. They don’t care who is going to be harmed.

“I spoke with the nurse at my school, who keeps track of all the kids that are quarantined. She told me that we had 80 kids with COVID throughout the school and six of them tested positive in one week. I had to ask when

they are going to close the school, but that hasn’t happened. Instead they are keeping it open, and I have taken it upon myself to get tested for COVID every two weeks.

“It is clear that the principal wants an illusion of normality. But a few weeks ago the principal had tested positive for COVID, and the assistant principal was quarantined. Shouldn’t we have closed down then?”

Some schools in the state have implemented what is known as a “hybrid model,” that is, simultaneously both in-person and online learning, which has only exacerbated the conditions of already overworked and underpaid educators.

Speaking to this, the teacher stated: “The hybrid model means that all teachers are forced to do double work, since we have to teach in-person classes, and then post recording and assignments online. We were not thoroughly trained in the online platform, so it is like we are working double duty.”

Despite assurances from the district, school administrators and state officials that schools can be reopened with appropriate safety measures, many, if not all, of the promised safety measures have fallen to the wayside or proven unable to meet the dangers of in-person teaching.

“It is also basically impossible to teach and socially distance,” the teacher commented. “When a student has a question, I can’t just stay seated behind my desk and yell across the room to them. I have to stand next to them and explain the assignment or the comment I wrote on their paper. So, we are getting exposed.

“Also, a lot of students have mask fatigue. They are constantly taking off their mask, and I have to remind them to put it back on.”

The life-threatening circumstances surrounding in-person teaching has begun to impact the mental health of educators and students. Explaining this, the teacher said: “You can see that a lot of the teachers are breaking down. I am trying to take care of myself and had to book my first appointment with a psychologist in my entire life.

“I believe the students are traumatized from everything going on. I don’t see teachers teaching or students learning, because everyone is stressed from the virus. But the administration is saying that we need to be meeting certain goals.

“I was coming early to prepare and leaving late. I could not keep doing that, so now I am just coming in early. A lot of teachers are also leaving education and finding other jobs.”

Asked how the administration treated teachers who lost loved ones to COVID-19, she replied: “One of the teachers I worked with lost his uncle and kept working. Another friend of mine [who is also a teacher], it is like her family is particularly susceptible to the virus. She has had multiple relatives who she either lost or who became deathly ill from the virus. She had to keep working because she really needed the money.

“A teacher who tested positive for COVID also sent out an email warning other teachers. She was doing the right thing by telling us, but since it was from her school email account, we think the administration just removed it.”

The teacher concluded her remarks with a powerful appeal to other educators: “There is strength in numbers. We are afraid, but together we can shut the district down. No one else will save us, so we have to take a stand and say something. We have to protect ourselves and our students.”

The Socialist Equality Party is the only organization working to mobilize opposition to the murderous efforts to reopen schools. We urge educators, parents and students to form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, to enforce safety measures and prepare collective action against unsafe conditions. To take forward this fight, we encourage educators to attend the online meeting being hosted by the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee this Saturday, October 10, at 3 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time. Please visit wsws.org/edsafety to register.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact