

Teacher death toll mounts as districts across the US push forward with school reopenings

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As more school districts across the US continue to reopen for in-person instruction, without fail they assert to their communities that safety is of the utmost concern. Just two months since schools began reopening in late July, the costs to human health and life expose these assertions as lies. There have been at least 47,376 cases reported in K-12 schools so far this year, and at least 37 educators have died since August 1, all of which were entirely preventable. These figures, as damning as they are, are surely an undercount, as state and federal governments are actively working to conceal the spread of the virus .

In the past two weeks alone, eight teachers have died from COVID-19. Reports of deaths will continue to pour in over the coming weeks and months, and in all likelihood begin to include children, unless an independent intervention of educators, parents and students across the country is organized to stop the deadly reopening in its tracks. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is fighting to build this movement through a network of local committees controlled by educators, parents and students, which have been formed in New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, Texas, Florida, Tennessee and Pennsylvania.

The most recently reported teacher death came on October 9, when **Choua Yang**, 53, died after battling COVID-19 for over a month. She was the principal since 2008 and CEO since 2020 of Prairie Seeds Academy Charter School in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. She and her husband founded the school in 2004, with a focus on Hmong language and culture. Yang came to the US from Laos as a refugee when she was 12 years old. The school has been closed for in-person instruction since March, and though students have remained off campus, some staff have been working in the building. Yang taught at multiple public schools in the Twin Cities prior to starting at Prairie Seeds.

For the past week, Minnesota has reported over 1,000 new COVID-19 cases per day, with hospitalizations rising steadily since mid-September. The Minnesota Department of Health has confirmed 1,315 cases tied to K-12 schools since August 1. In the state, there have been 115,000 confirmed cases and 2,204 deaths since the pandemic began.

In Oklahoma City, 50-year-old **Laurie Cochran**, a 4th grade teacher at Kaiser Elementary School, died on October 5 after being infected for roughly ten days, according to her family. Kaiser Elementary had already lost a teacher to the virus this school year, **Sherry White**, on September 1. Greg Worley, Assistant Principal at Kaiser Elementary, said that the two teachers were treasured by

students and coworkers, and that they were the “epitome of what you want in a teacher,” quoted *KOCO News*.

On Monday, Oklahoma surpassed the grim milestone of 100,000 cases. On October 10, there were 1,524 new cases, a record number for a single day. A record high number of hospitalized patients, 758, were also reported.

Margie Kidd, 71, died on September 28. She taught in Jasper County, South Carolina for more than 26 years and at Ridgeland Elementary School for 20 years. Her daughter Essa Jackson told the *Jasper County Sun Times* that her mother “expressed to us several times about her concerns with being back in the building with COVID-19 numbers still being high in South Carolina, but she had no choice because the teachers were required to attend in-person meetings as well as set up their classrooms, even though they were going to be doing virtual learning.”

In a statement that characterizes the situation faced by millions of workers across the country, Jackson noted that her mother, despite her advanced age and the immense dangers posed to her by the virus, “needed to work to pay her bills because my father was just getting over having colon cancer and heart surgery this summer, so she was the only one working.”

Jackson commented how her mother tried to be as careful as possible: “My mom took precautions by wearing a mask, face shield and gloves, but it just wasn’t enough to keep her safe,” Jackson told the paper. “She started having COVID-19 symptoms by her second week at work.”

South Carolina Department of Health has confirmed 1,277 cases in K-12 schools since September 4. The state has recorded 158,000 cases and 3,559 deaths. In September, teachers across the state organized a sickout protest against unsafe conditions and low pay. Demi Bannister, 28, was the first South Carolina teacher to die of the virus after returning to work this semester.

In Stanly County, North Carolina, 3rd grade teacher **Julie Davis**, 49, died on October 4, two months after in-person classes resumed in the district. Davis became an educator 18 years ago, after a career as an accountant, after the Columbine school shooting inspired her to become a teacher in the hopes that she could “change a child’s life, and maybe that wouldn’t happen again. And years later, she touched everybody,” her daughter told *ABC News* .

Despite denials from the school district that Davis contracted the virus at school, her brother Stan Andrews told Channel 9 News that he spoke to his sister while she was ill, and she believed she

contracted it from the school, after a student was confirmed to have the virus. He also emphasized that Davis was careful in consideration of her 74-year-old mother and her infant grandson, noting that she used curbside pick-up for groceries and drive-through pick up for pharmacy visits. The district announced it would switch to all virtual instruction for merely two weeks following Davis' death.

North Carolina has had 234,000 confirmed coronavirus cases and 3,799 deaths. On Monday, a reported 1,109 people were currently hospitalized, the highest number in two months. Reports published Monday stated that an estimated 10 percent of the state's 30,934 prisoners have contracted the virus.

Leo Lugo, a 56-year-old high school special education teacher in Chaparral, New Mexico, died on October 4. He fell ill after being on campus at Chaparral High School over fall break to prepare his classroom. Described as a kind, caring community member, Lugo had been a teacher for a little over a year. He was known for being a popular Spanish language radio host in El Paso for over twenty years.

The Gadsden Independent School District (GISD) board of trustees voted not to resume in-person learning until 2021 at the earliest, citing Lugo's death as a contributing factor. GISD has had to temporarily close four different schools in the past month due to outbreaks among employees, who have had to work on campus despite students learning at home.

To date, there have been 33,362 confirmed cases and 915 deaths in New Mexico. On Monday, the state reported its third consecutive record high for its seven-day average of new COVID-19 cases. El Paso, next to Chaparral, also reported on Monday a new record of current coronavirus hospitalizations.

In Arkansas, two educators died recently. **Jody Jenkins**, 57, superintendent of Atkins School District, died September 29. Jenkins grew up in Atkins, taught and coached football across the state, and returned to his hometown as superintendent in 2019. Local *Fox16 News* reported that a service was held at a local school football stadium to accommodate "the hundreds of people who wished to honor his memory."

Just two days later, **Susanne Michael**, 47, died October 1 after being hospitalized since September 15. She taught in the Harrisburg School District for 14 years, most recently teaching 4th grade at Harrisburg Elementary School. In addition to two children, ages 22 and 16, she and her husband had just adopted three children over the summer, ages 2, 7 and 12.

Since August 24, Arkansas has required all schools to reopen for in-person instruction five days per week. As of Monday, there are 831 *active* cases in K-12 public schools and 76 in private schools. Total cumulative cases and deaths in Arkansas are 93,487 and 1,586 respectively.

On September 28, over 170 teachers in the Little Rock School District refused to show up for in-person instruction, of whom 69 sent letters to superintendent Mike Poore announcing their protest, stating that they would be ready and willing to teach virtually from home. These 69 teachers were retaliated against with 3- to 5-day suspensions and a one-day pay dock, equaling \$900 to \$2,000 lost per teacher, according to the local teachers union, who moved quickly to end the protest after one day.

Olga Quiroga died on October 1, Chicago, after her 58th birthday. Despite students in the district attending virtually, teachers were forced to return to school for various preparatory events, including one where Quiroga met with parents and handed out school supplies, after which she fell ill.

Quiroga immigrated with her husband to the United States from Mexico in 1985. At the time she did not speak English and worked cleaning houses for \$50 per week, while attending a GED program and taking English lessons at night. She taught for Chicago Public Schools since 1991. Her daughter Giovanna is angered at the district's decision to reopen the schools, noting that for "my mom, it took one visit to that building to contract it... According to them, they're safe, they're ready, and they're clearly not."

Illinois has had 326,000 coronavirus cases and passed 9,000 deaths on Monday. Last Friday, Illinois health officials said they have verified COVID-19 outbreaks in at least 44 school buildings across the state, but noted that the spread may be wider than that. The state does not publish the number of cases linked to K-12 schools. At least 8,668 school age children have tested positive for the virus between August 15, when schools began to reopen in the state, and October 2—an average of 180 new infections among children per day. This is a 250 percent increase of average daily new cases among children between March and August.

The assault against public education is manifesting in multiple ways amid the pandemic. In addition to the risk of death, educators are facing historic threats to their jobs and livelihoods. In the US, there were 350,000 layoffs in education in September alone, following 1.4 million layoffs in April and May.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is fighting to halt and reverse the reopening of schools amid the accelerating pandemic, while ensuring that educators, parents and all workers are guaranteed full income and healthcare protections. We urge all educators, parents, students and workers opposed to the deadly reopening of schools to contact us today to join or begin building a committee in your district or state and prepare for a nationwide general strike. Nothing short of the full, independent mobilization of the working class will suffice in preventing further needless death among educators and the broader working class.



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