

Tennessee educator dies of COVID-19 after governor touts “strong safety measures” in schools

Our reporters
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Susan Keener—a 53-year-old educational assistant at Walter Hill Elementary in Rutherford County, Tennessee—died on October 14, several weeks after contracting COVID-19. Her death is a tragic reminder of the disease’s deadliness and an indictment of the entire political establishment that has given the green light for the reopening of schools and businesses across the country.

There have been at least 47,376 reported COVID-19 cases nationally in K-12 schools since the start of the year, and at least 37 educators have died from the virus since August 1. Tennessee alone has experienced over 220,000 COVID-19 cases and 2,847 deaths from the disease since the start of the pandemic.

While Keener’s death has not been widely acknowledged by the national media, only reported in a handful of local news outlets, details of her tragic death further expose how reckless and criminal it is to reopen schools in the midst of a deadly pandemic.

According to Keener’s family, she was in good health prior to contracting the virus and was not afraid to return to the job that she loved. Keener had worked at Walter Hill Elementary for 15 years, and, at the time of her death, was an educational assistant working with students with disabilities.

Autumn Raffaele, Keener’s daughter, told the *Murfreesboro Daily News Journal*, “There was nothing to indicate she would be at greater risk for this level of seriousness of the virus. Doctors were unable to give us clear answers (for her condition). ... There’s still so much they don’t know (about the virus).” Raffaele also stated, “The virus had just ravaged so many different organs by the time everything had been said and done.

“I want people to know that unless you’re directly

affected, I completely understand the sense that it’s just a bad flu. I had that same thought process until my healthy ... mother contracted it and had such severe complications.”

Keener’s battle with COVID-19 is shocking as it further reveals how rapidly the virus had impacted an otherwise healthy individual. The educator was admitted to Saint Thomas Rutherford Hospital due to complications from the virus August 25, a mere five days after receiving an initial diagnosis. Two weeks later she was put on a ventilator and transferred to Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville. She eventually tested negative and had what was described as “several good days” before passing away.

“They told us we weren’t going to have any more of those good days,” Raffaele told reporters. “I was with her all day the day she passed. I told her I loved her, and everything is okay, and it’s just hard to see your mommy that sick, but I wasn’t going to leave her, and I didn’t.”

K-12 schools in Tennessee are presently all open in some form for in-person learning. This is occurring even as the state has reported some of the highest rates of COVID-19 deaths among children in the United States. According to a survey from WalletHub reported in WKRN Nashville, Tennessee is the sixth most dangerous state in the country to reopen schools.

“There are some important metrics here where Tennessee ranks last or very close to last,” said WalletHub analyst Jill Gonzalez. “One being the most important is that Tennessee has the most child COVID-19 cases in the country about 10 times higher than let’s say Vermont, Maine, New Hampshire, Hawaii, so that’s obviously one metric that needs to

change.”

The death comes less than two weeks after Tennessee’s Republican Governor Bill Lee praised the “very strong safety measures” the state has supposedly set up in schools. Lee allowed schools to reopen in-person in August, even though the Tennessee Department of Health reported at least 2,000 new COVID-19 cases among children ages 5-18 between August 4-18.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a school volunteer from Nashville, the state’s capital. The school staff member stated she would not return to work unless she was allowed to work outside. Referring to Keener, she said she understands the pressures teaching assistants and paraprofessionals are under.

“If you are a paraprofessional like other frontline workers, you’ve got a choice: you’ve got to go back if you want to get paid,” she said. “As a volunteer, I have the freedom not to go back.”

According to the Murfreesboro school pay schedule, Keener was paid only about \$16 to \$17 an hour, or about \$35,000 a year. It would have been slightly more if she had a college degree, unknown as of this publishing, even after 15 years on the difficult job.

“I just heard about this earlier today, and I took it personally,” said a teacher in western Tennessee contacted by the WSWS. “I have been working with an assistant educator that is slightly older than the one who died. She also got COVID, and both her and her husband were sick for weeks and only recently recovered. She has been such a great help in my classes, and I had to think how devastating it would have been to have lost her.

“We keep hearing stories now about fairly young people dying from COVID. One principal got the virus, and it spread to her whole family. Her husband, who had previously had a kidney transplant had to be hospitalized and died later.”

Governor Lee, in alignment with the inhumane recommendations of the Trump administration, has continued to put the lives of students and teachers at risk by endorsing the decision of six Tennessee districts to designate teachers as “essential workers.” The new designation would have teachers stay at work when they are known to have been exposed to COVID-19 but remain asymptomatic, thereby risking the spread of the virus among students and colleagues. This is a

homicidal measure and a blatant violation of teachers’ democratic and social rights.

Keener’s death came a few short days after the formation of Tennessee’s first Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was created to fight the mad rush to reopen the schools. All Tennessee educators, parents and community members interested in organizing to oppose the murderous policy of school reopenings should join and build similar committees in your areas of work.



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