Houston schools reopen as COVID-19 surges in Texas

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On Monday, 80,000 children returned to school buildings in Houston, Texas, 40 percent of the Houston Independent School District's (HISD) total enrollment.

The push to reopen the largest district in the state, and seventh-largest in the country, takes place as the coronavirus pandemic is raging in Texas, which has over 881,000 confirmed cases and 17,646 deaths, the second highest numbers in the country. On Tuesday, the state recorded 4,856 new cases, an increase of over 1,000 a day from a month ago.

A single day after reopening, 16 schools had to immediately close due to coronavirus cases. The HISD COVID Dashboard reports 90 confirmed cases at K-12 schools, mostly among staff, who have been on campus before most students returned on Monday. Some students, including special education and students without internet or computers, have been on campus for the past six weeks. The dashboard's "COVID Gauge" is also currently set to Orange, indicating a 4-7 percent test positivity rate over the past 14 days, which "signifies a significant and uncontrolled level of COVID-19 in the community as determined by local health officials."

The Texas American Federation of Teachers, as with the teachers' unions across the country, has worked to contain the anger of teachers and divert it into support for the Democratic Party. Zeph Capo, President of both the Houston Federation of Teachers and the Texas AFT, blamed the reopenings on state Republicans only. The union statement said: "Our key objections to reopenings are directed at Gov. Greg Abbott, Attorney General Ken Paxton, and Education Commissioner Mike Morath. Our current policies do not protect Texans. The only way you can protect yourselves and your family is to vote them and their friends out of office."

However, the mayor of Houston is a Democrat, Sylvester Turner, demonstrating that the Democrats no less than Trump and the Republicans support "herd immunity" and the homicidal back-to-school campaign. On Wednesday, Democratic vice presidential nominee Kamala Harris tweeted, "@JoeBiden and I want to get your kids back to school as quickly and safely as possible. This starts with masks and rapid testing, science-based safety guidelines, and emergency funding to ensure our schools have the resources they need to keep students and staff safe."

In Oklahoma City, where students also began to return to the classroom this week, the American Federation of Teachers has been equally opposed to independent action by teachers to oppose reopenings. The president of the AFT-OKC said, "From the survey responses and calls we receive from teachers, we know there are many concerns, and rightfully so … We agree that this is not the right time to bring everyone back, and *although we cannot advocate for a work stoppage or strike as some teachers have proposed*, we can advocate for and enforce a safe work environment, and that is what we will continue to do [emphasis added]."

Since the beginning of August, at least 9,719 students and 6,454 staff across Texas have contracted the virus, according to the state's Department of Health and Human Services. This does not include private schools, and the district-by-district breakdown does not contain information for districts with fewer than fifty students enrolled in-person. At least seven educators across Texas have died of the virus since August 1, according to *Education Week.*

An elementary school teacher from the Dallas-Ft. Worth area and member of the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee described her working conditions. "I'm in Arlington. We had 16 staff

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members out yesterday–some in quarantine due to exposures, some on family and medical leave, others just regular sick, and today another teacher and his entire class were sent into quarantine along with all 3 special education teachers. How can this continue? The system is collapsing. The next shoe to drop will surely be the admins due to stress and exhaustion trying to keep the boat afloat."

The Texas Tribune reported that teachers across the state were forced to return to classrooms in September, even if they had underlying health issues. In the Austin Independent School District, for example, 700 out of 5,000 teachers received permission to work from home through December. However, "there is the fine print that says, if it becomes necessary to rescind the approval for school student needs, then we would have to do so," said Superintendent Stephanie Elizalde.

A teacher in the Eanes school district was initially given permission to work from home due to chronic bronchitis and susceptibility to pneumonia, but by September the district rescinded the accommodation, in order to fulfill staffing needs. Similarly, a teacher in Pasadena whose immune system is compromised after chemotherapy treatment was denied permission to teach from home. The Pasadena Independent School District received 59 requests to work from home through the federal disability accommodations process, none of which were granted.

A teacher's assistant in Mansfield told the *World Socialist Web Site* how she lost her job in August. She requested to work from home in May, due to being the primary caretaker for her elderly mother who has diabetes, but the school said they had no remote work for her. Instead she was tasked with duties like handling carpool and supervising 50 kids in a gym with no mask requirement. After being denied unemployment benefits she said, "I wasn't surprised. I appealed the decision but I don't know when they'll ever get to it. Like everyone else, we're one missed paycheck away from disaster. If my son loses his job, I don't know what we'll do."

In Houston, members of the HISD Student Congress spoke out against the return to campus. Jennifer Hamad, a high school senior and speaker of the student group said, "This idea of pushing people back to school prematurely is really horrible. It's quite a terrible position to be in as a student, possibly becoming a vector for a virus and possibly transmitting that to your parents, students, and teachers."

The reopening of schools has been a disaster. In the US, at least 67,422 students and educators have been infected this semester and at least 44 teachers, school nurses, bus drivers and other school workers have died. In New York, where schools reopened in September, the state has recorded an 18 percent increase in cases over the last two weeks. Boston Public Schools announced on Wednesday that it would immediately suspend all in-person learning indefinitely, following an increase in the positivity rate in the city.

The opposition to the policy of reopening schools must be unified across district, state and national lines. This requires a break from the Democratic Party and their backers, including the unions and pseudo-left organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America , all of whom support the drive to reopen schools and the ruling class policy of herd immunity, which signifies death on a massive scale. Instead, we call on all those in Texas who seek to mobilize a genuine fight against the deadly school reopenings to join and help build the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and contact us today.

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