

# Tennessee educator speaks out against unsafe conditions and lack of resources

Our reporters

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A middle school educator in Knoxville, Tennessee recently came forward to speak with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the unsafe conditions at her school. Knox County currently has nearly 13,000 cases of COVID-19 and 92 deaths, making it the third most affected county in the state, behind Shelby (Memphis) and Davidson (Nashville) counties.

With the abandonment of even the most rudimentary safety measures at schools and other workplaces, cases in Tennessee have continued to surge in recent months. October has been the state's deadliest month of the pandemic, with over 700 succumbing to the virus. The numbers of daily new cases and deaths have set state records in the past week, with a record 3,606 new cases and 65 deaths on October 23.

The Knox County school district employs some 8,000 workers and serves approximately 60,000 students, the majority of whom are from low-income and working class families. According to the United States Census Bureau, 13.2 percent of the county's residents live in poverty.

The teacher, who wished to remain anonymous to prevent retaliation, described the chaos leading up to the district's reopening in late August: "Before schools reopened, parents had one week to decide if their kids would be remote or in-person. Superintendent Bob Thomas did not release a plan until after the parents had decided, forcing them to decide before they had the facts.

"The plan requires everyone to wear a mask and teachers have to clean between classes. Everyone is getting their temperature checked before entering the building and teachers also have to fill out a self-assessment.

"We are given a spray to clean with and at first I was told that I need to let it sit on the desks for five minutes.

Then I was told to just leave it for two minutes, as if the same spray is going to just magically work faster. You also have students going everywhere with [Google] Chromebooks, which are never cleaned."

Explaining how the school is responding to outbreaks, the teacher said, "We are getting a weekly email saying that we had one or multiple cases. I am being told that a student of mine will have an 'extended absence,' and will need to do work from home. I am not told if the student has COVID-19, or if they are being quarantined because they were exposed to COVID-19.

"It is my understanding that after someone tests positive for COVID, they need to report to everyone that they were in contact with. I think this is a huge flaw for contact tracing. If I was sitting next to someone at a meeting and they got COVID-19, but they did not remember, no one would know I was exposed to the virus. I would not know.

Asked about how classes are functioning, she added, "I am teaching three in-person classes with the largest having 24 students. The other two have 14 and 13. My online class has 38 students. I am teaching English and the other online English class is honors. So, if someone switches to being remote they would be added to my online class."

Due to repeated cuts to public education at the federal and state level by both Republican and Democratic-led administrations, educators have been suffering from a severe lack of resources and have taken up the burden of supplying their students. In addition, a shortage of teachers has forced many to take on extra work.

The Knoxville teacher commented, "We have a shortage of special education teachers. With the current system, some of these teachers need to be in multiple classes at once, so they are rotating to different classes.

In the first couple of weeks of school we were also hit by waves of COVID-19. At one point we had ten teachers out and I know the majority had to be quarantined. We only had two subs. Everyone had to fill in any free block of time they had. On average, we might have two subs in the building, but we are lucky to get a sub. Recently we had three people out and only one sub.”

In opposition to the unsafe reopening of schools and other workplaces, teachers and education workers in Tennessee have recently formed the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File-Safety Committee to unite the struggles of educators in the state and across the country against the murderous efforts to keep schools open during the pandemic. Teachers, parents and students are encouraged to sign up to join the committee today and contact us to help organize in your school district.



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