

Omaha, Nebraska school worker dies from COVID-19 as cases spike and teacher anger grows

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Greg Petersen, a school custodian in the Millard School District of Omaha, Nebraska, died from COVID-19 on Thursday as schools in the state reopen amid the continued spread of the virus, fueling mounting anger among educators. Infections are rising rapidly in Nebraska, with a record 1,605 daily new cases on Thursday. As of Sunday, the state has recorded 652 COVID deaths.

Petersen was in his 60s and worked full-time at Grace Abbott Elementary as a custodian, and previously worked at other Omaha schools. His wife Lisa wrote on Facebook, “The kids and I are in shock. I don’t know what we’re going to do without him. Such a wonderful husband and father and a great guy.”

The school district has tried to absolve itself of all responsibility for Petersen’s death. Rebecca Kleeman, Millard School District spokesperson, told the *Omaha World Herald*, “We don’t know how he contracted the virus.” Kleeman claims Petersen had no contact with anyone else at the school.

Abbott Elementary has had at least three confirmed cases of COVID-19 this year while the district has officially reported over 85 active cases and 273 students and staff quarantined so far. Other schools have seen confirmed outbreaks as well. A principal at Millard North sent a letter Friday saying, “we learned of four positive cases within our community.” Counselors at Millard North were also asked to come back before a 14-day quarantine ended.

More than 70,000 Nebraskans have tested positive with COVID-19 as of Sunday. Douglas County, which includes Omaha, had over 421 confirmed cases by Friday, adding to a total of 22,786 total cases since March.

There have been 149 reported cases in schools over the past two weeks in Douglas County, which includes over 90 staff and 59 students so far. At least 174 educators and students are in quarantine.

In the midst of the spike of cases in Nebraska, President Donald Trump held a mass campaign rally last week in Omaha which served as a “super spreader” event. After his rally, hundreds of his supporters, largely the elderly, were stuck without any transportation in freezing temperatures.

The Trump administration has embraced the homicidal policy of “herd immunity,” the pseudo-scientific notion that the virus should be allowed to spread throughout the population, no matter how many people die. The policy has been embraced by a large section of the ruling class, including various Democratic mayors and governors across the country.

Republican Governor Pete Ricketts, a close ally of Trump, has pushed for the reopening of schools on the basis of this homicidal policy, defying medical and scientific advice. He said in August, “policymakers need to make these decisions because when doctors [address health issues due to the spread of COVID], they’re only looking at a very, very narrow part.” The chief concern of Ricketts, Trump, as well as the Democratic Party, is maintaining corporate profits and sending workers back to work and school—despite the immense dangers facing educators and other sections of the working class.

A hodgepodge of policies have since resulted in erratic changes from in-person education back to remote schooling in Omaha Public Schools (OPS). At least 881 teachers at OPS have been forced to quarantine due to exposure to those with positive cases.

Omaha's hospitals have also been strained. The University of Nebraska Medical Center has been making public statements for weeks warning of reaching capacity.

Anger is growing among teachers and educators in Nebraska, as across the country, as they face unsafe conditions and death as schools reopen. School administrators have tried to enforce a conspiracy of silence about the spread of the virus, telling teachers not to speak about the cases.

"One of our students, and her whole family, tested positive for COVID," a teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "Had she not shown symptoms and been tested a few days before she was scheduled to start in-person with us, she would have been in the room with several other students."

"Some of our rooms have no windows," she added. "None. The hallways are still packed during passing time. When I go out there, there is nothing near six feet of distance. Students are reminded to keep their masks up, but they can go for a while walking in the school before an adult sees them."

Another teacher shared her comments with a University of Nebraska professor, who posted it on Facebook. As soon as schools reopened, positive cases began to emerge. The teacher also noted the complicity of the teachers union, the Omaha Educators Association (OEA), which has done nothing to defend educators or students.

"Yesterday was day one with high school students in the building," this teacher noted as the school opened. "Today, a colleague was contacted by administrators to do contact tracing measures for a student. The administrator stressed to my colleague that the admin doesn't have to tell teachers that they've had a positive COVID-19 case in their classroom. However, teachers can infer this information when they are asked about where a student sat and who they might have had contact with.

"My colleague shared with me that another teacher had this student in their classroom eating lunch unmasked. Despite being around the student unmasked, this teacher was not asked to quarantine, presumably because they had a mask on. However, my understanding was that if either party did not have a mask on, it's considered an exposure.

"In any case, this was day one. DAY ONE. I'm

nervous about the secrecy about positive cases. I'm frustrated that my union can't seem to help. I have contacted OEA every step of the way. The two colleagues I mentioned above have contacted OEA. They note the information but it seems that the union is powerless to help us. I'm frustrated that a school board meeting took place last night without a statement from OEA. I'm frustrated that OEA has been silent as cases have exploded yet I see them posting on Facebook about trivia nights and poker runs. Where is my union? We need help. When do they speak up? When a teacher or student dies?

"I'm not sleeping well and having nightmares. I'm a person who dreams in obvious metaphors. Last night I dreamt that I lived in a high rise that was being demolished by Godzilla. As the building fell down around me I was on the phone contacting insurance companies and making arrangements to have a sub at work. I'm not okay. And I don't know any teachers who are."

As Democrats and Republican governors across the US push for more school reopenings as infection numbers grow to record heights, the teachers unions such as the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers have collaborated in the dangerous resumption of in-person classes.

Teachers across the country are taking action into their own hands to fight for the safety of educators and students. They have formed rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, to fight the spread of COVID-19, demand immediate closure of schools and move to remote learning. They also call for full funding of public education and online learning as well as income protection for all educators and parents who choose to stay at home.

Contact us today to learn more about these committees, forming one in Nebraska, or to speak about your own conditions.



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