

Two Alabama teachers die from COVID-19 as governor vows to keep schools and businesses open

Shelley Connor
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Over the past two weeks, the rate of COVID-19 infections across Alabama has increased by over 50 percent, with teachers and other school employees representing a significant number of these cases. In one Alabama school district, Hoover City School, two district employees have died within the past week after contracting the virus.

On November 21, Hoover City Schools Superintendent Kathy Murphy announced that two district employees had died after being diagnosed with COVID-19. Like most public education officials in the state, Murphy refused to name the employees or even the schools in which they worked, citing phony concerns for privacy.

Hoover City Schools is one of many school districts in the state that have witnessed a sharp uptick in COVID-19 cases in the past several weeks. Many Alabama school districts all but scuttled remote learning efforts after the first nine-week grading period, during which staffing inadequacies and subpar technology strained students, parents, and educators alike. Meager and non-standardized mitigation efforts, such as staggered school weeks or shortened days, were abandoned.

According to Alabama's K-12 COVID-19 Dashboard, which lags by about a week, at least 48 cases of COVID-19 were reported in Hoover City Schools as of November 20, adding to a total of over 2,261 cases in schools statewide for the same time period.

Hoover City Schools is not the only district where Alabama teachers have died after contracting COVID-19 since August. In September, 47-year-old special education teacher Leo Davidovich, of the St.

Clair County School District, died after a month-long battle with COVID-19 and an opportunistic bacterial infection. The administration of Odenville Middle School, where Davidovich worked, announced his death on Facebook "with great sadness." However, the administration's professed sadness over Davidovich's death did not translate into meaningful efforts to protect other teachers or switch to fully remote learning.

The back-to-school policies implemented across Alabama have not just affected teachers, but also their extended families. In October, two Alabama public school teachers anonymously told *Alabama Political Reporter* that they lost elderly family members to COVID-19 after coming down with the virus themselves. Both teachers emphasized that they brought the virus home to their families from schools where there are no viable sanitation or mitigation policies.

The *Alabama Political Reporter* noted the exasperation many Alabama teachers have felt since schools were reopened, with an anonymous Shelby County School teacher quoting her administration as saying, "You're not going to be able to keep six feet of distance... This is not going to happen. Period. Do the best you can, but we understand that's not going to happen."

The same teacher went on to explain how teachers have been left to determine how to best protect themselves and their students with little guidance or funding from school boards or administrators. She said, "There are teachers who have shower curtains hung up all in their rooms. There are teachers who are spending their own money to buy HEPA air filters. We're just kind of left on our own to figure out a way to protect

ourselves.”

In response to the teacher’s assertions, the Shelby County Board of Education spokesperson, Cindy Warner, stated, “Teachers have not been asked to spend personal money for PPE or supplies for their classrooms; however, they may have voluntarily chosen to do so.”

What Warner clearly leaves unsaid is that if teachers do not spend their personal money on these items, they simply go without. Warner also inadvertently damned her own school district’s response by noting that COVID-19 outbreaks increased once the staggered instruction schedule was abandoned after the first grading period. Like Hoover’s Kathy Murphy, Warner falsely invoked Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines to justify the district not reporting COVID-19 cases by school.

There is nothing accidental or ignorant about the policies that have led to the deaths of these teachers and their family members. School reopenings were a fait accompli from the beginning, a vital prong in the attack upon workers at the behest of industry and businesses. Similar policies have been carried out in every US state, resulting in over one million children and tens of thousands of educators becoming infected with COVID-19.

As news came of the renewed upsurge of infections across Alabama last week, the Business Council of Alabama (BCA) launched its “Keep Alabama Open” campaign. On its website, the BCA cites the need for “personal responsibility and buy-in” in order to keep the state economy running. “Alabama cannot afford to shut down,” the BCA website claims.

Alabama’s Republican Governor Kay Ivey was quick to do the BCA’s bidding. In response to the BCA launching the Keep Alabama Open campaign and following news of Alabama’s 50 percent increase in COVID-19 cases last week, she tweeted, “You’re welcome, @BCAToday. I will not shut down businesses; the business community certainly has my support. As I’ve said many times, you cannot have a life without a livelihood.”

The refrain of “personal responsibility,” so frequently spouted by Ivey and the business interests she baldly serves, is nothing more than a rejection of any responsibility on the part of employers or the state. It is

echoed in the shifting of PPE expenses onto teachers.

These callous policies are frequently attributed to ignorance or incompetence. Yet Alabama state officials and Board of Education administrators know very well what is at risk for teachers, students, and their families when they demand that they return to classrooms where social distancing is a laughable concept. To the contrary, school reopenings are a crucial prong in the attack upon workers; the inevitable deaths are the acceptable cost of doing business.

Alabama teachers will find no redress of their concerns with Board of Education officials or state government, nor can they count upon the Alabama Education Association or other unions. The critical task is to form independent rank-and-file safety committees in every school and neighborhood, to unite the struggle of educators across district and state lines, as part of a broader movement of workers worldwide to halt all in-person learning and nonessential work in order to stop the spread of the pandemic and save lives. We urge all those who wish to take up this struggle to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.



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