

Massive spread of COVID-19 in Kentucky schools and death of 15-year-old girl prompts statewide school closures

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The death from COVID-19 of a 15-year-old girl in Ballard County, Kentucky, coinciding with a massive spread of the pandemic, has prompted the closing of in-person instruction in all of the state's public and private schools. Kentucky's Democratic Governor Andy Beshear issued the executive order to close schools last week, as the number of COVID-19 cases statewide is growing exponentially, with 3,869 new cases Thursday.

Beshear admitted that almost 10,000 K-12 students and 2,000 faculty members are presently in quarantine or isolation across Kentucky. At a press conference announcing the closures, he said, "This virus at its level right now is and will overwhelm each and every one of our schools if we do not take action."

The belated decision could not save Alexa Rose Veit, 15, who had Down Syndrome and just last year had been successfully treated for leukemia. Alexa died November 15 after first feeling ill at Ballard County Memorial High School.

All Kentucky middle and high schools will move to remote learning until at least January 4, and only elementary schools in counties that have experienced fewer than 25 cases per 100,000 people and are following health guidelines will be able to reopen December 7, according to the Governor's executive order.

The COVID-19 surge that claimed the life of Alexa also impacted many of her close relatives, with her mother testing positive for COVID-19 at the same time and being hospitalized. Alexa died the day her mother was released from the hospital. Her older sister had previously recovered from COVID-19, and both her grandparents have since tested positive and been hospitalized, according to media reports.

The death of Alexa and the massive spread of the virus through Kentucky schools underscores the reality that schools are major vectors for the spread of COVID-19. A report by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) found

that as of November 12 there have been 1.04 million confirmed COVID-19 cases nationwide among children, accounting for 11.5 percent of all infections in the US.

Alexa was known as a "social butterfly" by friends, "with an infectious smile that brightens any day," Ballard County Emergency Management Director Travis Holder told CNN News. Holder wrote on Facebook, "We have got to come to the realization that this is real. This isn't political, it's not something that 'has always been here' it is real. We must start taking the precautions seriously."

Ballard County is one of Kentucky's poorer counties, but the upsurge of the pandemic has also hit more affluent suburbs, including in nearby Williamson County, Tennessee, where a sudden rise in COVID-19 cases has prompted nearly half the district's public schools to shift to remote learning or a combination of remote and in-person learning. Williamson County is the richest county in the state, and 24 of the county's 49 schools have made the change to remote learning, with more expected to do the same.

Fully 15 percent of COVID-19 cases in Williamson County are children in county schools, where roughly 3,000 teachers educate about 40,000 students. The latest county report notes that 193 students and 56 staff members are in isolation, while 2,387 students and 186 school staff members are quarantined.

The Tennessee Department of Health announced recently that out of a pool of 36,153 recent tests statewide, there were 4,589 new cases of COVID-19 with a 12.5 percent positivity rate for a single day. As of November 22, there have been 340,476 COVID-19 cases and 4,266 deaths reported in Tennessee.

Williamson's 15 percent rate is almost 4 percent higher than the national level. Both totals for infections are only expected to climb as national, state and county leaders take half measures to halt the spread of the virus.

As more and more children and their teachers and school staff are getting sick, county officials are hell-bent on

driving the youngest children back into classrooms. After the traditional Thanksgiving break for students, high school and middle school students will begin remote learning from November 30 until December 4. Williamson's elementary students will return for in-person instruction beginning November 30, to enable businesses to compel parents to return to work.

Williamson County is both the richest county in the state and number seven in the Forbes 2020 list of top 10 richest counties in the US with populations more than 10,000, with Tennessee's highest median household income at \$104,367. Despite being a wealthy county, Williamson is unable to attract teachers because of low pay.

At its November 16 meeting, the Williamson County School Board of Education approved a pay raise to help attract more substitute teachers. Superintendent Jason Golden told the *Community Impact Newspaper*, "Traditionally, our substitute staffing [fill] rate is somewhere about 85% on a daily basis. Right now, it's in the 40s. So it's been a really difficult issue for us as a result of COVID-19." Golden added that many of the substitute teachers that usually teach in the district have not returned this year.

"The data that we've gotten from our substitute teachers about why they've said no. The vast majority of it is just a discomfort with COVID-19," Golden said. "Our goal is that moving up that minimum to \$100 daily might incentivize those who haven't been [substituting] for us who have that ability to come and serve, especially during this holiday time. It's not perfect, but it's what we feel we can afford right now."

The school board raised the daily pay for uncertified substitutes to \$100 a day, a \$15 per day increase, while certified substitutes will receive \$120—an increase of \$30 per day. The \$30 increase amounts to just \$15 an hour for an eight-hour day for substitute teachers to risk their lives and the lives of their families.

Golden told the media the district is also facing a shortage of teacher assistants, who are near the bottom rung in pay, making as little as \$18,000 a year, according to LinkedIn.com.

"As far as pay, it's sad, our full time teachers are not paid well either," a Williamson County mother of two said. "Despite being a very wealthy county our school funding is horrible."

Williamson County is home to Tennessee Republican Governor Bill Lee, an acolyte of Donald Trump who is opposed to taking serious steps to curtail the spread of COVID-19 at the expense of business. From the very beginning of the pandemic, Lee has hidden behind calls for "personal responsibility" before reluctantly issuing a "Safer-

at-Home" voluntary lockdown program, urging Tennesseans to "find solace in prayer."

When hospitals and nurses were running short of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), including masks, gowns and gloves, Lee's state Department of Health suggested using swim goggles, garbage bags and small plastic grocery bags as substitutes.

A study conducted by the Tennessee Education Association (TEA) recently found that COVID-19 rates for teaching staff are sometimes double the rate for the communities where they teach. They concluded, "The data indicate in-person instruction increases infection risk and that Tennessee educators will become ill at a far higher rate than the state's general population."

The teachers association pledged to "call" on Lee to take several steps, including enforcing Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines, providing "hazardous duty pay" for staff involved with students, additional health benefits for infected teachers, "fund extended educator sick leave for active cases or quarantines" and providing "firm" guidance for infection thresholds for school closure.

The TEA did not say how Lee was to be made to do any of this, given his hostility to any safety precautions whatsoever. The union has done nothing to organize the enormous opposition among teachers and education workers, and is above all terrified that this opposition could develop into a powerful movement outside of their control.

The TEA's toothless appeals to Lee are part of a consistent policy pursued by teachers unions across the US, which in Democrat- and Republican-controlled states have agreed to the unsafe reopening of schools.

It is critical that educators take the fight against unsafe working conditions into their own hands, as we have done through the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. We urge all educators, parents and students in Tennessee, Kentucky and throughout the Mid-South region that wish to join the struggle to close schools and stop the spread of the pandemic to contact us today to get involved.



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