

Alabama doubles down on school reopenings, as healthcare catastrophe hits the state

Emma Arceneaux
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As the state death toll in Alabama surpasses 4,500, with ICU beds near capacity, Montgomery Public Schools (MPS) sent teachers home for the holiday with a menacing memo, threatening that they must be prepared to return to unsafe schools January 4. The memo to “MPS ALL,” said it wanted to “make sure our employees” know that the Federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act expires on December 31 and that any absences due to COVID-19 exposure would have to be covered through accrued leave.

The administration notes, in no uncertain terms: “When we return to school on January 4, 2021, the leave that the federal government has provided will not be in effect.” It adds, “All positive cases will require that the employee uses his/her accrued leave,” and “All absences of 5 or more consecutive days require a doctor’s note.” The right to isolate and work from home would only be granted, the document adds, “as a result of close contact **at school**” (emphasis in the original).

This means teachers who may have not accrued leave time or who have already used it for quarantining will be left with few options and pressured to return to work even if they are sick or contagious. Such blatantly irresponsible policies threaten not just the health and safety of school workers, but students, parents and the community as a whole.

Montgomery teachers were infuriated by this email. One angrily posted on Facebook, “This is the most insensitive and distasteful thing anyone could do on our last day of school before going on Christmas break which happens to be the same day [that] another MPS employee, 2nd employee at Lee [High School has died] within 2 weeks. This is a damn disgrace... Someone has a lot of blood on their hands.”

The Alabama healthcare system has reached a state of crisis. The state currently has the fifth highest rate of infection per capita over the past seven days, at 82.4 daily cases per 100,000 people. On December 22, there were 4,758 new cases recorded and the death toll reached 4,587. By comparison, all of mainland China with nearly 1.4 billion people has a COVID-19 death toll of 4,634. The number of new cases is expected to reach 100,000 for the month of December, up from the 57,000 added in November.

On December 11, only seven percent of the state’s ICU beds were available, according to Dr. Donald Williamson, president of the Alabama Hospital Association. That day, Montgomery hospitals reported zero beds available. Jefferson County, the largest in the state, had only 13 available. Though bed availability

changes from day to day, the trend of increasing hospitalizations has been consistent. *New York Times*’ current estimate of ICU occupancy in Alabama is 91 percent.

COVID-19 hospitalizations in Alabama reached a record 2,527 on Tuesday, the first time hospitalizations exceeded 2,500 since tracking began. *The Gadsden Times* quotes Dr. Williamson as indicating the worst is yet to come: “I don’t see any reason to expect that number to be the highest.” He continued, “January and February are going to be the darkest days our healthcare system in the state has seen.” The 7-day average for hospitalizations on December 22 was 2,419, compared to 1,550 in early August.

Meanwhile, for his part, Alabama State Superintendent of Education Eric Mackey is being rewarded for making every effort at keeping the state’s schools open during the pandemic. The state school board graded his performance this year as 4.23 out of 5, up from 3.82 last year.

Mackey’s salary, currently at \$257,000, will rise by \$7,710. The average salary of a public elementary school teacher in Alabama was \$45,160 in 2017, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor, although large numbers of educators make far less. The majority (64 percent) hold master’s degrees.

Speaking for the business interests across the state which are determined to keep parents on the job, the state news network AL.com also recognized Mackey as one of the “Alabamans who made a difference in 2020.” Indeed, Mackey made a catastrophic difference for educators throughout the state. His policies, in tandem with politicians locally and nationally, have resulted in massive community spread of the deadly virus and the deaths of at least six educators.

Mackey recently gave “credit” to local school boards too, saying, “Schools boards have really jumped in and provided the kind of leadership and common sense approaches that we need.” In other words, local school boards are likewise under the thumb of the Alabama Business Council representing powerful interests—the automakers, bankers, transportation and business magnates across the state.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has previously reported, teachers in Montgomery have demanded the option to work from home after all of the district’s students were moved to virtual learning, but the school board refused to address the teachers’ concerns. Demonstrating the complete indifference of decision-makers to the plight of workers, the board did not even acknowledge a series of recent educator deaths in the district,

including two from COVID-19.

School boards across Alabama are seeking to damp down educator anger by offering “extraordinary compensation” bonuses ranging from insulting one-time payments of \$200 to \$1000 to educators, administrators and staff.

Similar to the \$600 for individuals allocated in the recent pandemic “relief” package, this money will do nothing to address the immense social and economic crisis faced by working people, nor will it make up for the sickness and death brought about by school reopenings. Despite having a surplus in its account for the first time in years, Mobile County, the largest school system in the state, will not be giving educators any extra compensation.

Scouring public records, the WSWs can verify that the following six lives were unconscionably snuffed out by the demand to reopen schools: Charles Tucker, a custodian at Hoover High School, and a second unnamed schoolworker in the district; Dr. Dennis McCorvey and Morris Lewis Pitts, Lee High School Assistant Principal and custodian at Jefferson Davis High School in Montgomery, respectively; Leo Davidovich, special education teacher at Odenville Middle School, St. Clair County; and Misty McKee, teacher at Dodge Elementary School, Mobile. The criminal lack of reporting by the state and districts means this is undoubtedly an undercount.

Despite the terrible toll upon teachers, students and parents, school districts across the state continue to push for in-person instruction. Some districts—Baldwin, Montgomery and Shelby—are delaying the return of students by just a single week after the holidays, insisting that this grants enough time for any possible infections to run their course. Districts that have reverted to all virtual-learning, such as Tuscaloosa City Schools, are still planning to return students to the classrooms throughout January.

In Muscle Shoals, Alabama, where 400 metalworkers have gone on indefinite strike at the Constellium Aluminum plant, two schools moved to virtual learning for the end of the semester due to COVID-19 exposures.

Mike Howard, superintendent of St. Clair County Schools, washed the district’s hands of responsibility for spreading the virus and instead shifted blame to individuals’ personal decisions, stating, “We have asked that the residents of St. Clair County to please wear masks, social distance, and refrain from gathering in groups as much as possible... we cannot control what people do outside of school, the schools are forced to react. We need everyone’s help in keeping our schools open.”

Last week, St. Clair County Schools reported 95 COVID-19 cases in the school system. In November, the whole district moved temporarily to virtual learning due to immense staffing shortages.

The fact is that school reopenings are directly responsible for the spread of COVID-19 within the school systems and within communities. Alabama K-12 schools recorded 3,325 new cases for the week ending December 18. The weekly case count has increased every week since the Alabama K-12 Dashboard launched at the end of October.

Nationwide, the COVID Monitor has tracked 435,674 cases in K-12 schools. A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* found that the widespread closure of schools in mid-March saved at least 40,600 lives over a 16-day

period and resulted in an estimated 1.37 million fewer infections over a 26-day period in the spring.

Adding insult to injury, the culpable politicians across the US who have forced the reopening of business and schools and have downplayed the dangers of the virus are some of the first to receive the COVID-19 vaccines. Alabama’s Republican Governor Kay Ivey, who asserted her loyalty to the business community, tweeted in November, “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.” Ivey received her first dose of the Pfizer vaccine on Monday.

On December 1, Ivey issued a statement calling for schools to reopen for in-person instruction as soon as possible. Lying through her teeth, she claimed, “As we are learning more about COVID-19, we are seeing more and more clear evidence pointing out that our students are safe in the classroom with strong health protocols in place... I strongly urge our education leadership on both the state and local levels to return to in-person instruction as soon as possible.”

Immediate action must be taken to stop the spread of the virus and save lives. All schools and non-essential production must be closed until the vaccine is widely distributed and the pandemic is brought under control. In Alabama, as everywhere else in the US and internationally, the measures that are necessary to save human life are not permissible as they impinge on the profit accumulation of the financial elite. School bureaucrats and administrators are rewarded for advancing the interests of the ruling class while doing nothing to protect workers.

Education workers must unite with the Muscle Shoals metalworkers and reach out to workers in all industries. To fully connect and coordinate this fight, workers must form rank-and-file committees completely independent of the corporate parties and the treacherous trade unions, who have facilitated the reopenings.

We urge all readers to sign up here to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and begin the fight to turn out to the entire working class, including Hyundai and Honda workers, Walmart workers, Amazon and other logistics workers, and healthcare workers in Alabama, across the US and internationally, in a common fight in defense of life and against the profit system which benefits only the ruling elites.



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