Tennessee Education Association estimates more than 16,000 Tennessee educators have had COVID-19

Harvey Simpkins
8 January 2021

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will be holding a national online meeting at 1 p.m. EST this Saturday, January 9, titled, "Stop in-person learning until the pandemic is contained!" We urge all educators, parents, students and workers who wish to join the struggle to close schools and nonessential businesses to register today *and invite your coworkers and friends.*

Based on a recent survey conducted by the Tennessee Educators Association (TEA), over 16,000 Tennessee education workers are estimated to have had COVID-19 since July. At least eight Tennessee teachers and support staff have died from the coronavirus.

Tennessee has had a staggeringly high number of confirmed COVID cases. Out of a total population of 6.89 million, as of January 7 there have been 625,237 confirmed cases, or just over 9 percent of the state's entire population. Tennessee's Department of Health reports 7,381 residents have died.

The TEA conducted its survey December 10–21 and received more than 7,000 responses from teachers and other education workers. More than 12 percent responded that they had been diagnosed with COVID during the 2020–2021 school year. Indicative of the widespread outbreak in the state, a staggering 35.83 percent reported having to quarantine.

There is no doubt that the widespread reopening of schools was a major factor in the spread of the virus in the state. Most school systems in Tennessee have been open for in-person learning, whether in a hybrid model or fully in-person. Out of 147 school districts, the Tennessee Department of Education reports that only 20 are remote-only. Nine districts require in-person instruction, providing no online option. This is reflected in the TEA's survey responses, in which 86.58 percent of respondents reported working in either in-person (45.96 percent) or hybrid (40.62 percent) settings.

The impact of the pandemic and the decision to reopen schools with meager resources and training for online learning is taking its toll on Tennessee educators. More than 79 percent of respondents to the TEA survey reported working more hours this year, with almost three-quarters reporting working more than 50 hours a week. Over a quarter, 26 percent, reported working more than 60 hours.

Teachers are also required to take on more assignments and responsibilities, often with inadequate training. In response to the question "Is your work more or less difficult this year than in past years?" 92.75 percent responded with either "more difficult" (36.49 percent) or "much more difficult" (56.26 percent). Over 89 percent responded that they have been given new assignments or responsibilities, with only about 10 percent agreeing that they had received adequate training and support.

Government indifference to the lives of teachers, and the working class more broadly, is having a deep impact on educators. Over 84 percent of survey respondents reported a negative "emotional impact" from working in public education during the pandemic. And, in an indication of the growing anger in the working class against the ruling class response to the pandemic, almost 75 percent of respondents reported that the state government's response to the pandemic was inadequate. Over 46 percent of respondents rated the state response as "poor."

In response to the survey findings, a Tennessee

© World Socialist Web Site

teacher posted on Facebook that she is “Absolutely exhausted.” The teacher continued in the post, “but more importantly frustrated. I (and almost every educator I know) have spent LOTS of $ on digital resources to send to our virtual students. Our classroom materials just don’t cut it when the students have to do so much independently. I spend at least 10 hours a week trying to find supplemental digital resources that are compatible with our digital platform to reinforce what we are teaching. Then, I use my own $ money to pay for them.”

Another teacher discussed the additional responsibilities they have taken on during the pandemic: “We’re taking food to children’s houses to make sure they’re fed. We’re zooming/FaceTime/Google Meet video conference teaching as best we can to teach them. We’re meeting kids on their porch to teach in person if parents are ok with it. We’re making copies of things for kids to take home and do, while giving our personal numbers to parents to call if they need help. We’re doing what we always do. Taking what we have and making the best we can. Is it ideal? No. Is it perfect? Far from it. Teachers are doing what we always do. The best we can.”

Despite the obvious risk for teachers and school personnel to contract and spread the coronavirus while schools remain open, TEA President Beth Brown responded to the union’s findings by pleading with the state to “assist with the burdens of teaching in a pandemic.” Brown said, “The administration and legislature must acknowledge the sacrifices we’ve been making and take concrete steps to give us the support and recognition we have earned.”

The TEA listed no “concrete steps” of its own and made no demands that all education move to online learning. It has also made no call for strike action on the part of teachers to shut down schools. Instead, the TEA is keeping teachers on the job despite the escalating pandemic and the staff deaths that will continue to increase.

Unsurprisingly, the TEA’s parent union, the National Education Association (NEA), supports the reopening of schools and has enthusiastically endorsed Joe Biden’s pick for Education Secretary, Miguel Cardona. Cardona is a strong advocate for reopening schools in the midst of the pandemic and a proponent of various schemes to privatize public education.

On December 22, NEA President Becky Pringle tweeted that “Miguel Cardona will be instrumental in helping @JoeBiden strengthen our public schools, colleges, and universities, returning to in-person instruction safely, and dismantling systemic racism in education.”

In an announcement the same day on the NEA website, Pringle stated, “In these tough times, students, educators, and families face unprecedented challenges—from the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis to the systemic racism that has held back too many students for too long. We look forward to partnering with Secretary-designate Miguel Cardona in taking on these challenges together,” Pringle said.

In “partnering” with Cardona, the NEA, along with the American Federation of Teachers, will do all they can to fully reopen schools in the face of growing teacher resistance and the escalating cases of coronavirus tied to schools. Nationwide, there have been over 489,000 cases in public schools, including 136,086 staff, according to the COVID Monitor web site.

Teachers, students and parents who want to resist the deadly opening of schools must unequivocally break from the unions and the union-backed Democratic Party. The *World Socialist Web Site Educators Newsletter* calls on teachers, students and parents to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, the only organization fighting to unify education workers, students and parents nationwide against school openings. Such a committee has already been established in Tennessee and we welcome all those who agree on the need to immediately close the schools to join today at wsws.org/edsafety.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site