

Tennessee educators and parents call for fully funded remote learning to contain the pandemic

Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
20 January 2021

On Tuesday, Tennessee's Republican Governor Bill Lee opened a special session of the Tennessee General Assembly by doubling down on his hard-line stance that all schools should be open for in-person instruction amid the deepening COVID-19 pandemic.

As hospitals reach capacity across the state and reputable scientists increasingly recognize that schools are major vectors for the spread of the virus, Lee stated provocatively, "Here's the bottom line. You can't say 'follow the science' and keep schools closed. You can't say 'I believe in public education' and keep schools closed."

The special assembly was ostensibly called to address the five following issues: learning loss from the pandemic, education funding, accountability, literacy and teacher pay. Following Tuesday's assembly, Lee made clear to reporters that programs to address learning loss, including summer and after-school tutoring programs, will only be available to districts that have resumed in-person learning.

We, the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, denounce this attempt to pressure and bribe schools to reopen, in particular as more infectious variants of COVID-19 are spreading undetected throughout the United States. We call for the immediate closure of all schools until the pandemic is contained, and for the provision of ample resources to provide high quality remote learning to all students.

Nearly a year into the pandemic, Lee, Education Commissioner Penny Schwinn, and other state politicians have suddenly realized the crisis of learning loss, the under-funding of education, low literacy rates, and inadequate teacher pay.

What a fraud! These same politicians bear primary responsibility for the crisis in education that Tennessee's educators, parents and students now face. They have collaborated to defund public education for decades and siphon funds to charter schools and private corporations.

They have used the pandemic to deepen the assault against teachers, denying Tennessee educators a 4 percent pay raise last June, while awarding Lee and other top government officials raises totaling \$794,900. Lee has recently stated that last year's 4 percent raise could be approved later this year, but this is no

guarantee. Even if passed, this would amount to a 2 percent raise per year, less than the rate of inflation.

For months, the governor has opted to sit on hundreds of millions of dollars allotted by Congress through the Education Stabilization Fund. While the funds were issued in May, by December Tennessee had only spent \$229 million out of \$596 million.

At every step, Lee and Schwinn have tried to pit teachers and parents against each other by claiming students are experiencing "learning loss" due to remote learning. In reality, the sole reason that learning loss has occurred is due to the totally inadequate resources provided by politicians at the local, state and federal level. Across the US, remote learning has been deliberately sabotaged and working class families have been starved of resources. The aim has been to pressure schools to reopen in order to compel parents back into unsafe workplaces.

The drive to reopen schools in Tennessee, as across the US, has been predicated on pseudoscience and the flouting of even the most minimal safety measures. At many local school board meetings, officials refuse to even wear masks. Educators and parents from across Tennessee report that social distancing and mask wearing are not enforced at schools that have reopened in their communities.

In late September, Lee and Schwinn toured Sterchi Elementary School in Knox County and Anderson County High School, during which they hailed their "very strong safety measures." Since then, both schools have had to go virtual at different points to deal with the rampant spread of the virus.

As a result of the reopening of schools and nonessential workplaces, COVID-19 has spread uncontrolled throughout the population. Since the start of the pandemic, 687,751 Tennesseans have been infected with the virus and 8,430 have died, with both figures skyrocketing throughout the fall. Tennessee now has the fourth-highest number of cases per million residents of any state, and the number of COVID-19 deaths within the state has more than quadrupled since early October.

The Tennessee Educators Association (TEA) recently released a survey exposing that over 16,000 educators in the

state have contracted COVID-19 since July. Despite these astronomical figures, the union has done little, either preemptively or otherwise, to raise concerns about the hazardous working conditions their members face or the flagrant disregard of science by our leaders throughout the crisis.

Our committee denounces the response of Lee and the entire political establishment to the pandemic, and the facilitation of these policies by the TEA and other unions. When our committee was first formed in October, we stated that our purpose is “to unite teachers and education workers with the broader working class against the unsafe reopening of schools and workplaces. Our aim is to mobilize the largest section of workers in a collective action to halt in-person instruction, stop the spread of the pandemic and save lives.”

We stand firm in these principles and are oriented toward uniting working-class Tennesseans, including educators and parents in every district; autoworkers at the Nissan Smyrna plant; HCA and other health care workers throughout the state; Amazon and other logistics workers, and all sections of the working class facing the same brutal working conditions and economic precariousness during the pandemic.

In opposition to the duplicitous “five key education issues” presented by Lee, our committee demands the following:

- **For the immediate closure of all public, private and charter schools for in-person instruction!** All health metrics across Tennessee make clear that schools cannot be safely opened at present. We demand that schools remain closed until rank-and-file safety committees, working in conjunction with trusted scientists and public health experts, can ensure the safety of children, teachers and school employees. With vaccines now being distributed, every effort must be made to contain the pandemic and prevent any further infections and deaths.

- **Full funding and resources for remote learning and social-emotional supports!** Every student and teacher must be provided with state-of-the-art technology, training and internet access to ensure high quality remote instruction immediately. In areas with no internet access, school buses with Wi-Fi capability must be provided until broadband is available. Class sizes must be reduced. Thousands of educators, staff and tech workers across Tennessee must be hired to make this a reality.

- **Halt all nonessential production!** All nonessential production must cease until the pandemic is brought under control and gradual phases should be taken to reopen as workers become vaccinated. Until the pandemic is fully contained only food production, health care and logistics workers should continue working, and they must be provided with the highest quality safety equipment.

- **Full income protection for parents, caregivers and nonessential workers!** In order to ensure the highest quality remote learning, parents must be able to assist their children and have their needs provided. There must be a moratorium on

all evictions and foreclosures. For parents who work in health care, logistics or other essential industries, additional resources must be provided, including through the development of free and safe community learning pods, which allow students to be supervised while attending online learning.

- **Free speech and protection for whistleblowers, including teachers, students and staff!** This is a fundamental human right enshrined in the First Amendment of the US Constitution and must be adhered to unconditionally. Free speech in schools has been upheld by the Supreme Court (*Tinker v. Des Moines*, 1969). Informing the public of unsafe conditions within schools is not “disruptive speech” but a public good and must not be infringed upon by local education agencies or the Tennessee Department of Education. We denounce the arrest of Florida COVID-19 whistleblower Rebekah Jones, whose only “crime” was exposing the mass infections stemming from school reopenings across the US.

Funding for these demands—which are necessary to contain the pandemic and save lives—can be found by actually spending the state’s “rainy day” and CARES Act funds. According to recent data released by the state, Tennessee’s “rainy day” fund has amassed roughly \$1 billion, which Lee and other state lawmakers have delayed or refused to allocate to effectively implement remote learning. In March, instead of withdrawing from the fund, Lee made an unprecedented \$350 million contribution to the fund.

Even greater funds have been hoarded by the state’s most egregious pandemic profiteer, Thomas Frist Jr., co-founder of HCA Healthcare and one of the wealthiest men in Tennessee. According to the *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, Frist has seen his net worth continue to climb amid the pandemic from \$7.5 billion to over \$10 billion. This roughly \$2.5 billion must be heavily taxed and used to fund education and other social programs.

We urge all those opposed to the deadly reopening of schools to contact us today to get involved and help build the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee widely, to ensure that schools are closed and remote learning is fully funded. Sign up today at wsws.org/edsafety!



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact