

Alabama teachers speak out as four more teachers die of COVID-19 this week

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On Thursday, Montgomery Public Schools (MPS) piano teacher Leslye Ames, 49, became the latest educator to die from COVID-19 in the Alabama capital. Four teachers in the school district lost their lives to COVID-19 in a single week, making this the most deadly week within a deadly month for Alabama educators.

Dwayne Berry, an MPS administrator and football coach, died on Monday, January 19. “He was really loved by all the kids, all the coaches there,” MPS athletic director Patrick Fenderson told the *Montgomery Advertiser*. “He represented Lee High School and the Montgomery Public School family really well... He was an outstanding guy.”

On Wednesday, the deaths of Capitol Heights Middle School physical education teacher Lushers Lane and Park Crossing High School coach DeCarlos Perkins, 36, were announced.

The staggering impact of these deaths upon staff and students, as with all of the 424,177 needless deaths from COVID-19 across the US, is incalculable. There have been numerous heartfelt tributes made by community members in Montgomery. “Whatever kids needed, (Perkins) helped them out,” Reggie Jackson, a local football coach, said, adding, “It didn’t matter if they went to Park Crossing. He’d promote them and get them to where they needed to be in life.”

Booker T. Washington Magnet High School Principal Dr. Quesha Starks said, “Mrs. Ames was a brilliant and beautiful spirit who was committed to developing the gifts and talents of young musicians. We will never forget the bright light that she and her family provided the entire BTW community and the piano magnet.”

In addition to the four educators who died over the past week, Montgomery educators, students and community members mourn the loss of all these educators: Joshua Farrow, assistant principal at Johnnie Carr Middle School who worked in MPS for 15 years; Ricardo Hogan, a paraprofessional at Park Crossing High School; Morris Pitts, a custodian at Jefferson Davis High School; Shai Hudson, a teacher at Goodwyn Middle School; Kay Toole, a guidance officer at Brewbaker Technology Magnet; Dr. Ennis McCorvey III, assistant principal at Lee High School; and Rodney Scott, a basketball coach at Lee High School.

The pandemic is entirely out of control in Alabama. This week schools have reported 2,155 new cases, while at least 11 districts have reported their highest weekly positive cases. These are primarily in large county systems including Mobile, Jefferson,

Montgomery and Baldwin. On January 20, State Superintendent Dr. Eric Mackey reported that cases in schools across the state were at their highest level, expressing regret that it’s going to be “hard to keep in-person learning as the first option,” according to ABC News.

WalletHub reported a national study on safety metrics on January 21, which found that Alabama is the worst in the nation in terms of current death rate per population, hospitalization rate and vaccination rate. Overall it was rated 50th out of 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Two Alabama school teachers spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about their growing anger with the refusal of the state to make all learning remote and allow all teachers to work from home. To preserve their anonymity, they will not be referred to by their real names in this article.

Mia, an eighth-grade teacher with Montgomery Public Schools, said, “We can easily and efficiently teach from home like we did in April and May.” The school board, though, is “more focused on money than lives.”

Mia, who has asthma and is at high risk of complications from the virus, must instead teach both face-to-face and virtually from her classroom.

Debra, a sixth-grade science teacher in North Alabama’s Calhoun County School District, says that there is no way to follow Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines in her classroom. Some of her classes have a roster of 30 students.

“My classroom is not unusually large. It’s about eighteen by twenty feet,” she explained. “With that many kids... we couldn’t even get in the door” with appropriate social distancing. “It’s so close and packed in there.”

Debra contracted COVID-19 on the last week of instruction before Christmas vacation. Her husband, who has a spinal cord injury, contracted the virus from her. He spent two weeks in an intensive care unit (ICU) and still suffers from extreme fatigue and weakness. Debra missed two weeks of instruction in January, and her pay will be docked after Calhoun County Schools ended an allowance for COVID-19-related absences.

The complaints that Alabama teachers have brought forward are varied and grave. Most teachers are dissatisfied with the personal protective equipment (PPE) provided by their school boards. “They gave us three masks at the beginning of the year,” Debra says, “and they gave us a plastic shield partition, but it doesn’t fit

the desk, and it falls over constantly.”

Mia reports that she struggles to breathe while wearing a mask due to her asthma. When she conveyed this to her principal, he told her to wear a face shield. “A face shield does not protect you from airborne particles from COVID-19,” she pointed out, citing CDC guidelines.

Like Debra, she was given a partition for her desk; with the computers she is required to use for distance learners, there is no room for it. Moreover, she frequently has to go to students’ desks to assist them individually.

Teachers are also disaffected with the absence policies and limited pay for COVID-19-related leave. Throughout Alabama, school districts have dropped the two weeks of paid leave they had initially allowed for teachers who were affected by the virus.

Both Mia and Debra report risible contact tracing policies in their districts. Debra was shocked and angered that the school did not report her positive test to her students’ parents. “Why wouldn’t they tell the parents if we’re doing contact tracing?” she says. “I teach in a Title I school in an impoverished area. A lot of these kids live with elderly family members.”

Mia was informed this week that she had been in close contact with a coworker who had tested positive for coronavirus. The school will not allow her to quarantine, though, as the district has changed its quarantine policy from 14 days post-exposure to two days. She has no sick leave available after having to be out to care for her ill sister.

Mia says that teachers, including some who are on chemotherapy, are forced to work in “dilapidated” schools where the air quality and ventilation systems are already sub-par. Her building, she says, “is already full of mold, mildew, possibly asbestos. The superintendent admitted at the last board meeting that some schools may have it.”

The floor in her own classroom is “puckered,” she says, from water damage. An air quality test in her room revealed levels of aspergillus and penicillium spores well beyond the healthy limit. Both of these molds are known to cause disease.

In both Mia’s and Debra’s districts, athletic programs have continued practices and events where social distancing and masking are not possible.

Mia says that classroom masking and social distancing policies mean very little when athletes are still “Face to face, mouth to mouth, nose to nose” at practices and at events. At least three of the faculty deaths in Montgomery have been from the athletic program.

“They made a lot of decisions based on football,” Debra says of Calhoun County Schools. Her school’s football team is quarantined with coaches in the school library, apart from the general population during instructional hours. “They all play sports, so they’re playing together without masks.”

Relations between teachers and their school boards are breaking down. Debra, who was wracked with coughing spells during her interview, will be forced back to work in conditions where social distancing is impossible. Meanwhile, she says, her district’s offices are locked down, and board members are following CDC guidelines.

“They almost killed my husband,” she says. Yet during his

illness, no one from the board of education, even members she had counted as personal friends, called to inquire about his health.

“They’re in make-believe land,” Mia says of her district. Despite the fact that MPS has lost at least seven teachers to COVID-19 since the start of this school year, board members are acting as if it’s not happening.

She says that the school board did not even acknowledge the deaths of its employees at their meetings until just last week, when they offered a moment of silence for the last teacher known to have died. The gesture struck her as insulting after the board’s reckless treatment of its faculty and staff.

Both Mia and Debra report that the Alabama Education Association (AEA) has refused to support its members’ demands for stricter COVID-19 protections. Indeed, the AEA responded to the unprecedented four deaths in 48 hours by issuing a press release stating that it was “unfortunate.”

The AEA did not call for the closure of schools, writing, “MPS employees are working under the most strenuous and complicated circumstances anyone could have imagined, and they are doing it with considerable grace and compassion for the students in their care.” In other words, the union continues to rubber-stamp the demands of Republican Governor Kay Ivey that educators report to unsafe school buildings.

The AEA has neither answered nor returned the many phone calls Debra has made to them about her concerns. “I tried to work through my union and that didn’t work,” she says. “I went rogue.”

“AEA is a joke,” Mia stated sharply, adding, “They play both sides.” Mia noted that the union advised teachers to garner parents’ support for distance learning, commenting, “it’s not parents paying AEA dues.”

Debra has taught school for 26 years, but the state’s treatment of teachers during the pandemic has soured her on public education. “I knew I was going to be a teacher at six years old,” she says. “I never wanted to be anything else. Now it feels like a divorce or a death.”

Mia, who has taught for 21 years, plans to remain in public schools, despite feeling as if she is “walking into a death trap” every day.

We urge all Alabama educators to join the newly-formed Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which has been established to oppose the unsafe opening of schools and nonessential workplaces and save lives. To get involved and attend the next meeting of the committee, or to build a committee in your area if one does not already exist, sign up today at wsws.org/edsafety!



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