Stop the deadly reopening of Nashville schools!

Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
9 February 2021

The Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee condemns the recent decision by the Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) system to begin phasing in face-to-face instruction in the midst of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

The plan to return to in-person learning in the second largest school district in Tennessee was announced by Metro Nashville/Davidson County Schools Director Adrianne Battle on Monday, February 1. By Thursday, students with special needs had returned to their classrooms. The reopening plan is set to move forward at seemingly breakneck speeds with pre-K to fourth grade students scheduled to return to classrooms this Tuesday, February 9. The plan indicates that all grades will be phased in by March 3.

Prior to the recent reopening, Davidson County, where Nashville is located, was one of only two counties to keep schools remote throughout the pandemic. Currently, only schools in Memphis/Shelby County are slated to remain remote for the time being.

While we support the decision for schools in Memphis to remain remote, the reopening in Nashville should be taken as a warning to teachers, school workers, students, parents and the broader community in Shelby County. Without educators developing their own independent organizations to fight against school reopenings, the pressure from state officials and school boards will force them into unsafe and potentially deadly working conditions.

According to the MNPS website, the phasing in will continue as long as the COVID Risk score—a score calculated based on the "transmission rate, 7-day positivity rate, and 7-day average of new cases per 100,000 residents"—remain below 7. However, the day prior to the plan being announced, the COVID Risk score was already at 6.9.

Within the same week as the plan to reopen schools was announced, the local news reported the death of Don Breedwell, a 65-year-old MNPS teacher, who passed away from the virus. There have also been confirmed cases of the more infectious and lethal B.1.1.7 variant of COVID-19, first discovered in the UK, in Nashville.

At a recent press conference, Republican Governor Bill Lee stated, "We have prioritized teachers in the vaccination process, as you know, behind health care workers and the elderly. They are the first in lines for vaccines." Lee's administration has estimated that teachers in Tennessee would be scheduled for vaccinations in March.

Since Lee has continuously advocated for all schools to open for in-person classes immediately, the scheduled vaccination would take place after a substantial section of Nashville teachers were already exposed to the virus. Teachers in most other counties have been working under unsafe conditions for months.

In an expression of distrust in the ability of the MNPS to open safely, local Nashville news outlets have reported that teachers have signed up to receive the vaccine in other counties and have driven to rural districts in an attempt to get vaccinated before in-person classes begin.

The drive to rapidly reopen schools before the vaccine is widely distributed puts large sections of the population at risk for contracting COVID-19, and potentially suffering long-term debilitating symptoms or even death. A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, "Association Between Statewide School Closure and COVID-19 Incidence and Mortality in the US," found that, "school closure was associated with a significant decline in both incidence of COVID-19… and mortality."

Lee's drive to reopen the schools is not based on any coherent public health policy, but an economic policy to get kids in school so that their parents can return to work. To accomplish this goal, Lee and his Republican cohorts have attempted to use every possible method to pit parents against teachers and threaten districts that do not reopen.

In a completely hypocritical stunt last month, Lee held a special session of the Tennessee General Assembly to address "learning loss" allegedly caused by virtual instruction. A week after the special session, the governor took a more direct approach to reopening by threatening to

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withhold funds if Nashville and Memphis schools did not reopen.

While Lee's pressure on MNPS to reopen schools reflects the thuggish political approach taken by Republicans, the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee warns that teachers should put no faith in the Democratic Party to fight against the unsafe reopening of schools.

The Democrats, from the Biden administration down to mayors of major cities, have expressed their support for the reopening of schools in order to reopen the economy. Biden's director of the National Economic Council, Brian Deese, made this clear with the statement, "We need to get the schools open so that parents… can get back to work."

Chicago's Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot is similarly pushing for schools to reopen, with her administration threatening retaliation against teachers that refuse to teach in-person. On Sunday, Lightfoot and the leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) announced a tentative agreement to begin a phased-in reopening of schools throughout February, which has provoked widespread opposition among rank-and-file Chicago educators.

The role of the various teachers unions has in fact been to negotiate the reopening of schools, instead of organizing any serious struggle against the return to work under unsafe conditions. This has been the case in Chicago, where the CTU has worked to prevent a strike against the return to in-person learning. The Tennessee Educators Association (TEA)—which is affiliated with the National Educators Association (NEA)—has been equally egregious in failing to mount any collective actions, even as they note that over 16,000 educators have contracted COVID-19 since July.

The Metropolitan Nashville Educators Association (MNEA) has similarly responded to the announcement of schools reopening by issuing a blog post detailing the MNPS plan.

The Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee upholds the unity of the working class in response to the pandemic. The ability of COVID-19 to run rampant throughout schools, factories and other workplaces puts a pressing need to establish connections and develop a collective action in response to the pandemic. We encourage teachers to join our committee and to start reaching out to Amazon workers in Murfreesboro, autoworkers at the Nissan Smyrna plant, healthcare workers at Vanderbilt University Medical Center and beyond.

We reiterate our core demands to contain the pandemic and save lives:

• **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 of 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.

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