

Mobilize educators and workers across Tennessee to stop school reopenings in Memphis!

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

The Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee denounces the decision of Shelby County Schools (SCS) officials to resume in-person instruction as the deadly COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage throughout the state, the country, and the world.

SCS is the largest and final school system in Tennessee to capitulate to Republican Governor Bill Lee's homicidal mandate to reopen public schools to in-person instruction at all costs. It follows closely on the decision of Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) to begin phasing in face-to-face instruction only weeks ago on January 29.

The reopening of schools in Shelby County is a confirmation of the warnings issued by our committee. In a statement published February 9, we wrote:

[T]he 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.

We encourage educators in Memphis and across Shelby County to join our committee and take up a struggle to halt the reopening of schools. As part of this fight, teachers in Shelby County and across Tennessee must draw the lessons of the push to reopen schools and the collaboration of politicians and union officials in enforcing the unsafe return to in-person classes.

The decision to resume face-to-face instruction in Memphis schools beginning March 1 comes after a showdown between Governor Lee and SCS Superintendent Joris Ray, who flouted the governor's threat to withhold

education funds to districts that continued to offer a remote-only instructional option. Despite having the lowest income per capita of the three largest school districts in Tennessee, at the beginning of January, Ray maintained he would "follow science" and continue virtual instruction as the only option for Shelby County students.

Again, in early February, even as Metro Nashville announced its plans to resume in-person learning, Superintendent Ray refused the governor's demand for SCS to open by mid-February, stating that the closure of SCS to in-person learning was keeping the community safe.

Despite his previous claims to stand firmly on the side of science and the welfare of his community, on February 12 Ray abruptly announced that SCS would resume in-person instruction beginning March 1, with teachers returning to classrooms on February 22. Superintendent Ray noted decreasing COVID-19 cases as the reason for his reversal, as well as Governor Lee's threat to cut school funding if his district refused to provide a face-to-face option for instruction.

When polled in December, only 17 percent of Memphis teachers opted to return to classroom instruction. At the time, Ray intended to use teaching assistants and district staff to supervise students in classrooms. He was also pushing for all teachers to be vaccinated before returning to classrooms. In the end, Ray did not deliver on either of these promises, saying on February 12, "We looked at every aspect to try to give teachers choice. But we need teachers to do this work effectively. We want our teachers in front of our students." In return for risking their lives and the lives of their families, teachers will be given a one-time \$1,000 bonus while non-certified staff will receive \$500.

The United Education Association, one of SCS's two teachers' unions, supports the superintendent's decision to return teachers to unsafe working conditions. Danette Stokes, the president of the UEA said, "We are ready to re-enter safely" after hearing about "updated safety rules."

It is no coincidence that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released new school reopening guidelines just days before Superintendent Ray announced the reopening of SCS.

The CDC, under the auspices of President Biden's executive order that the majority of all public schools would reopen in his first 100 days, declared that in-person instruction was safe under all but the most dire COVID-19 infection metrics. While the CDC guidelines suggest safety protocols such as weekly testing of staff and students when COVID-19 infection rates are high, these are only suggestions. As Tennessee teachers who have been in classrooms since the beginning of the school year can attest, such precautions are nonexistent.

Despite Governor Lee's drive to risk the lives of teachers and their families by forcing districts to return to in-person instruction during a pandemic, he has not made vaccinating teachers a priority in the state. Teachers in large districts such as Metro Nashville and Knox County are putting their names on waitlists in smaller counties that are vaccinating teachers and driving sometimes two hours or more to receive each round of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Lee's drive to reopen schools is not based on any coherent public health policy, but on 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 to threaten districts that do not reopen.

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."

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 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 the broader community. In-person instruction should only be considered when educators, students, and the communities in which their schools reside are fully vaccinated.

? 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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