

# Teachers in US state of Georgia herded back into unsafe classrooms

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Despite the deaths of at least four Georgia public school teachers in recent months and teachers being denied vaccinations, school and state officials are forcing reluctant educators to resume in-person teaching in dangerous school buildings.

While teachers are demanding that they be given the option to teach virtually from home, school boards are overwhelmingly denying their request. To add insult to injury, teachers are being denied vaccines, which are being chaotically rolled out as they are not considered to be a priority.

Teachers in several metro-Atlanta counties, including Fulton, Cobb, Gwinnett and DeKalb, are displaying their opposition by demonstrating with signs reading “No More Teacher Deaths,” by calling in sick and by speaking forcefully at monthly school board meetings against in-person schooling.

In addition, authorities are threatening retaliation against teachers who refuse to comply or even express concern over physically returning to classrooms.

An elementary school teacher informed the *World Socialist Web Site* that her school superintendent called her personally and threatened to take punitive measures against her for voicing opposition to in-person schooling. Her school system e-mail has now been blocked, thus denying her access to teacher resources such as Google Classroom software used for remote teaching.

Many teachers in Gwinnett County are now demanding explicit protections against retaliation for requesting the virtual teaching option.

This murderous program is being implemented in line with the Biden administration’s policy of compelling schools to reopen in order to force parents back to work. The pandemic has been allowed to get out of control in Georgia as everywhere else in the US. The

health care system is so overloaded that teachers know there is no guarantee they will receive timely and proper medical care if they get infected.

Over the past couple of months, the state has experienced a consistent pattern of a high number of daily deaths, with the average of 99 deaths and 2,862 new infections per day over the past 14 days. This is only slightly down from around 108 deaths each day, over the preceding two weeks. Infections have fallen by 2,000 per day, but there have been increased cases of the UK variant found in the state.

Noting that the number of UK variant cases statewide had jumped from 19 to 45 in a couple of weeks, DeKalb County Health Director Dr. S. Elizabeth Ford Right told WSB-TV in Atlanta, “When you consider the fact that they’re only testing about one percent, that’s a pretty significant jump.”

Since the pandemic began early last year, there have been close to a million reported infections and more than 15,450 deaths out of the state population of about 11 million.

Because of the shortage of vaccine production by Pfizer and Moderna, the state has been allotted a mere 146,000 vaccine doses per week. It is not clear whether even this minuscule amount is being received.

Under the state’s so-called phase 1A+ vaccination, teachers are not eligible to get vaccinated although they are being sent back to schools. Supposedly, only those 65 years or older are eligible, but vaccination centers have “paused” appointments for the older age group, too, because of vaccine shortages.

When a private medical center in the town of Elberton began to vaccinate Elbert county teachers in January, the Georgia Department of Public Health seized supplies to punish the medical center and, by extension, the residents of the county for violating the

state's roll-out plan.

Health department officials raided the facility after they learned teachers were being vaccinated and confiscated 470 doses of vaccine. In addition, in a punitive measure, no new doses of vaccines are going to be shipped to Elberton for six months until July 27.

An upset doctor, Jonathan Poon, who works at the clinic told NBC News, "Everything that we had tried to do up until now to vaccinate our county was just laid to waste."

He also emphasized that teachers were not taking vaccines from senior citizens because they were also being vaccinated at a brisk rate.

Over the past couple of months, there have been at least four reported teacher deaths from COVID-19.

The latest victim was 46-year-old teacher and coach Mark Suttles, who died last week. He was a special education teacher at Riverdale Middle School and a track coach at Riverdale High School, both of which are in Clayton County.

Although it is not absolutely certain, it is likely Suttles contracted the disease in the high school where he was a track coach. This is because Suttles taught his middle school students remotely from home, whereas he would go in-person to the high school.

In angry comments to a WSB-TV reporter, LaShane Suttles, Mark's wife of six years, questioned why sports was a priority during a pandemic and why coaches were being forced to appear in person. Denouncing the resumption of in-person schooling, Lashane said, "You're putting the people that are teaching the future in danger."

To absolve itself of any responsibility for the death of Mark Suttles, the Clayton County school superintendent issued a callous and virtually incoherent statement, saying, "The school district wishes not to speculate as to who and how the employee may have contracted the virus given the possibility of contraction from many sources."

On Thursday, January 21, two other teachers who work for the Cobb County public school system in the Atlanta suburbs died from COVID-19 complications. Dana Johnson, Kemp Elementary School teacher, and Cynthia Lindsey, a paraprofessional at Sedalia Park Elementary School, died that same day, within hours of each other last Thursday from COVID-19. Dana Johnson was a wife and mother of three boys. She had

been on a ventilator in an ICU since Christmas Eve.

Earlier, Patrick Key, another Cobb county teacher, died on Christmas Day after a month-long battle with the COVID-19. Key was a beloved art teacher at Hendricks Elementary School who had taught in the school district for 23 years.

What was common to all of the teachers was that they were compelled to appear physically in the classroom or school.

Heather Welch, the niece of the Patrick Key, minced no words during an interview with a local TV station, condemning the school board for its criminal indifference. She said, "I would say to the leaders of the Cobb County School District that they have blood on their hands. All three of these deaths are their fault."

None of this had any impact on the Cobb County school board, which has continued to display a brazen indifference to the teachers' lives. After a school board meeting held a day after the deaths of Dana Johnson and Cynthia Lindsey, board members ordered in-person schooling to restart on January 25.

The leadership of the two major national teachers' unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Educational Association (NEA), are actively collaborating with the national and state authorities to herd teachers back into unsafe classrooms.

The only way for Georgia teachers to defend their own lives and those of their students and the community at large is by forming rank-and-file safety committees, democratically controlled by educators and independent of the unions and both big business parties. The goal of these committees is to unite teachers, parents, students and broader sections of the working class to shut down schools and nonessential production, guarantee full income to all workers affected, until vaccines are widely available and the pandemic is contained. We urge teachers in Georgia and other states to join the national network of Educators Rank-and-File Committees to take up this fight.



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