

“Something needs to change, and we need to act”

Teacher in Nashville speaks out against the unsafe reopening of schools

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In line with the drive to return to in-person learning across the United States, on March 3 the second largest school district in Tennessee—Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS)—will complete its roughly month-long plan to allow all students to return to face-to-face learning.

Davidson County, where Nashville is located, was one of the few counties in Tennessee to keep classes completely virtual for most of the school year. However, amid pressure from Republican governor Bill Lee both MNPS, it announced plans in February to begin offering in-person options.

The reopening of schools in Davidson and Shelby Counties is now taking place as new and potentially more deadly variants of COVID-19 are being identified across the US and within Tennessee.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with a teacher at a charter school in Nashville about the conditions around the reopening of schools in the district. To avoid retaliation from MNPS, the teacher's name has been changed to Vicki.

She said, “The process of reopening has been strange. On Labor Day they were saying we would start the year virtual, then they were saying we would be virtual until Christmas, but in October they announced that they would be moving forward with a return to in-person learning.

“In October the district sent kindergarten through fourth grades and kids with special needs back first, since they were doing things in phases similar to what they are doing now. They were going to phase in middle school, but announced they would not reopen the middle schools because the cases were too high. They still kept the K-4 kids in the schools though, and

sent them back later.

“Then in January a state representative from Williamson County met with the governor, and proposed a bill that districts that did not have 80 days face-to-face would have their funding cut. We had previously been told that high school would probably not return, but now they are getting ready to send them back. The line is that if Williamson County can be open, then so can Nashville.

“No one mentions that Williamson County has not handled this well, and has had to close temporarily at different points because of the spread of the virus. In Rutherford County, four teachers died, and it is just not discussed.

“The main reason they are giving for why we need to be in-person for the last two-and-a-half months is because the testing is going to be in-person. But, the testing is a mess basically every year, and I can only think of one time that it ran smoothly.

“The number used for reopening schools [COVID-19 Risk Score] in Nashville was between eight and nine when they were discussing the reopening, and it started to fall pretty rapidly. It is now below four. It is so clearly a lie.

“The one good thing is that [the director of MNPS] Adrienne Battle made sure that teachers could get vaccinated before the reopening. I think there was a lot of pressure put on Battle and the superintendent in Memphis to reopen schools.

This reporter asked her thoughts about the reopening in other areas and Biden’s prioritizing a return to face-to-face learning. Vicki responded, “Honestly, I was glad when Biden beat Trump, but I am not dumb. I know that the two of them are not that different. The

overarching priority is the economy, and the policy is really for teachers to act as babysitters so the parents can get back to work.

“I was more surprised when the bigger cities with strong unions like Chicago and New York decided to reopen.”

This reporter discussed with her the role of the teachers' unions in the Democratic Party's reopening campaign, which is relying upon them to isolate and demobilize teachers in order to reopen schools. The role of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) was to lay the framework which the Democrats and the unions are now utilizing in cities around the country, from Los Angeles to Philadelphia.

After this discussion, Vicki returned to the situation within Nashville schools.

She added, “We are constantly being given contradictory information. I teach in a 100-year-old building. They said that they upgraded the filtration system, but told us it was not a strong enough filter to get COVID-19 out of the air. But, then they say it is safe.

“There is no coherent policy for if a student gets COVID-19. They are not quarantining everyone he or she came in contact with. In October the plan was that if a family member tests positive for COVID-19, the student would be quarantined, but I actually don't know if that is the current plan. We have rapid testing and can separate the kids that test positive, but the reality is that when we get the test it is already too late.

“I will have roughly 30 kids in my class. They can't be six feet apart. They will be smooshed together on the bus, and will eat lunch together.

Asked how teachers with kids have handled the reopening, she explained, “A lot of teachers have had to take on substantial additional costs to prevent their kids from going back to the classrooms. Most of my friends have set up pods, where small groups of kids are doing virtual learning and they all pay for a babysitter to watch the group. But every teacher is still worried that they might bring the virus home to their family.

“One of my coworkers is on maternity leave, and I know she is terrified that she will expose her infant to the virus. But, she can't get an exemption from teaching in-person.

“A friend of mine, who teaches in another southern

state, has rheumatoid arthritis and couldn't get an exemption either. She became incredibly sick, her arthritis is worse then ever, and she needs to use an oxygen tank. But her district keeps trying to push her to go back to the classroom.

Asked if there is anything she would like to say to other teachers, she added, “Last March we were all being told that we were heroes, and now if we raise our concerns about things not being safe and that we are risking our lives we are denounced for not caring about the kids. The reality is that there was no good choice for us this year. It is not the same kind of joy teaching virtually, when it is hybrid we are doing twice the amount of work, and in-person we are constantly worrying that we will expose our family to COVID-19.

“We need to ask ourselves: how much are we willing to tolerate? Are we going to risk our lives? Something needs to change, and we need to act. My hope is that this whole experience has opened people's eyes to how little they [school administrators and politicians] care about us.”



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