

Mobilize educators and workers to stop in-person learning in Tennessee!

Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
8 March 2021

The Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee condemns the reopening of Shelby County Schools (SCS) to in-person instruction, even as COVID-19 cases remain at dangerously high levels across Tennessee. SCS serves roughly 111,000 students in the Memphis metro region and is the 25th largest school district in the US.

On Monday, March 8, Shelby County Schools completed its deadly reopening process, with grades 6-12 returning to classrooms. Grades Pre-K-5 returned a week before on March 1.

Shelby County is the largest, and final, school system in the state to reopen classrooms to students after Republican Governor Bill Lee threatened to withhold school funding from the remaining districts that only offered virtual instruction for students as COVID-19 cases surged this winter. Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) began phasing in face-to-face instruction on January 29.

Memphis-Shelby County, Nashville-Davidson County, and Knoxville-Knox County, the three largest school districts in Tennessee, remain at a “very high-risk level,” according to the *New York Times*. While the paper recommends school districts in this category limit grades pre-K-5 to small in-person groups and virtual learning for students 6-12, as of March 8, teachers and students from all grades will be back in classrooms.

Another source, the website COVID Act Now, an NGO focused on tracking the pandemic, lists Tennessee as one of the most vulnerable states for a new surge of infections. The group notes that 48 percent of the state’s population live and work in crowded conditions or is in one of the groups at highest risk for contracting the virus.

Governor Lee’s January 2021 bill, which forces the two largest school districts in the state to provide in-

person instruction or suffer state defunding, is followed by an equally unscientific bill to remove the decision to close schools from community health departments to politicians.

Senate Bill 103 was passed by Tennessee’s Republican legislature on February 22. The bill empowers school districts to ignore rulings of health departments during a public health emergency, while giving the governor the ability to force schools open in the event that he disagrees with a district’s decision.

Some districts, such as Knox County Schools in east Tennessee, had already broken from their local health department in August 2020 when schools opened for in-person instruction with an option for students to learn virtually. Knox County Schools developed its own metrics, separate from the county health department, for determining when schools would shift from in-person to virtual instruction when COVID-19 numbers in individual schools made in-person instruction untenable.

Under this ridiculous system, it was not uncommon for churches to be closed and restaurants and bars to restrict numbers of patrons, while classrooms were filled to capacity with 35 students every day, five days a week. It should be no wonder that by December 2020, Knox County became one of the global hot spots of the pandemic.

Now that Governor Lee and his Republican cronies have placed the well-being of our teachers and students in the hands of politicians rather than scientists, there is no doubt COVID-19 cases will rise in Tennessee and more people will lose their lives.

As Lee forces teachers and students back into the schools, he has allocated \$10 million of the state’s \$63.6 million Emergency Education Relief funds from last year’s federal COVID-19 relief package to charter

schools. This funding will go to new charter schools and management companies as public school classrooms reopen with substandard ventilation, and only seven percent of the state's population has been fully vaccinated.

During a public health crisis that has killed over half a million Americans, Lee is making good on his promise to use desperately needed public school dollars for his reactionary policy of promoting "school choice," which aims to privatize public education.

We encourage teachers throughout Tennessee to join the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and take up the struggle to reverse the reopening of schools. As part of this fight, teachers across the state must draw the lessons of the push to reopen schools and the failure of politicians and union officials to mobilize educators against the dangerous return to in-person classes.

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."

Our 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, health care 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! No to the corporatization of education! Over \$60 million were provided to Tennessee as part of the Governor's Emergency Education Relief fund. However, the allocation of these funds was delayed for months. Now teachers are being told that a substantial chunk of these funds will be used to aid charter schools. We demand that funds instead be used to provide every student and teacher with state-of-the-art technology, training and internet access. Class sizes must be reduced. Thousands of educators, staff and tech workers across Tennessee must be hired to make this a reality.

- Halt all non-essential production! All non-essential 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, logistics and other truly essential industries should stay open, and these workers must be provided with the highest quality safety equipment.

- Full income protection for parents, caregivers and non-essential 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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