

“There is strength in numbers and we are those numbers”

Memphis teacher speaks out about the unsafe return to in-person instruction

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11 March 2021

On Sunday, March 14 at 3PM CT, the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will be holding a weekly meeting. The WSWs encourages teachers from across the state to register for the event and attend to discuss the unsafe reopening of all Tennessee school districts.

On March 8, Shelby County Schools (SCS) in Tennessee completed its return to in-person classes for all grades. The school district serves the Memphis metro region and is the largest district in the state, as well as the 25th largest in the US, with roughly 111,000 students.

The reopening of SCS schools also marks the complete reopening of all districts across Tennessee, despite the continued spread of COVID-19 throughout the region. In order to force the reopening, Republican Governor Bill Lee threatened to withhold school funding to districts that remained completely virtual, with SCS and Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) specifically being targeted.

While the initial claim has been that in-person classes had to be offered to provide a quality education, the rushed reopening in Shelby County has caused an immense crisis for educators, students and parents. Many teachers have shared stories on social media describing that the internet and applications used within their classroom are unable to handle the return of students.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with a veteran Memphis teacher with over 25 years of experience about the conditions around the reopening of schools in Shelby County. To protect her anonymity and avoid retaliation from the district her name has been changed to Lisa.

She elaborated about the experience of SCS reopening, stating, “We were really pushed into schools following a meeting with the superintendent. We were given basically no time to prepare. We were told that we would need to start asynchronous learning in a little over a week and that classes would start in-person on March 1. Asynchronous learning meant that we would need to show up to our classrooms and prepare the work that students would do at home.

“There was a boil water alert because of a storm the first day that we were supposed to be back in the building, so we all had to work from home. But, face-to-face learning was not delayed and still started on March 1.

“We had no time to prepare for everything. We had to get our classrooms in order in a few days, and you had teachers setting up shower curtains around their desk so that they would have a divider. People were buying face shields or making their own.

“Teachers had extremely short notice to get childcare for their kids and had to spend a lot of money for a babysitter. It is also more difficult since some schools have changed the schedules. Teachers are coming in half an hour earlier because they need to check students’ temperature.”

Commenting on the district’s indifference to teachers’ opinions and thoughts on reopening, Lisa said, “The reopening is really a slap in the face to us. We took a survey in the fall, and we had to choose if we would teach in-person or remote. Now the district is just disregarding the survey, and everyone needs to be in-person.

“I called human resources and sent an email to the Office of Professional Standards because I have health

issues. I got an email back in 45 minutes denying my request to teach virtually. They are denying teachers' requests to be fully virtual. We have teachers with sickle cell anemia, immune deficiencies or who are caregivers, and they have all been denied."

Lisa described the conditions at her school, stating, "The classes are also a mess. We have about 30 percent of the students learning in-person, and the school WiFi can't support all of them. The kids who are in-person can't share their work, their video is dropping out, or the teachers' video is failing. I've heard of one class, where only one student is in-person and the rest of the class is remote.

"The reality is that teachers have been viewed as babysitters for a long time, and now they have just gone out and said it. They should not have to put my life or other teachers' lives at risk."

Asked what she thought about the claims that students learn better in-person given the current state of Memphis schools, she added, "Kids are going to do their work or they're not going to do their work, and that is true if they are in-person or remote. I think some subjects are going to suffer, but the students are also learning important life lessons. They are going to be more technologically savvy.

"Some students feel more comfortable remote. Other students are not good remote and I have contacted their parents. They just need a little more help on that side of the screen."

After some discussion about the recent reopening in Tennessee and across the US, she added, "Memphis and Nashville are both blue areas [Democrat-controlled] and governor Lee basically did an executive order to force them to reopen. But, I have heard Biden make statements that he wants all the schools open in-person in his first hundred days in office.

"Politics and parties aside. Biden wants students back and Lee is a big Trump man, but you just have to follow the money. Biden can give the money to states for education and Lee wants that, but we teachers don't ever see it. It goes somewhere else.

"I've taught in a few different states. When they found a way to make money from this, education went downhill. That is why you have this huge focus on testing since there is money in that.

"The teachers are picked on, possibly more than any other profession. We are evaluated two times a year,

and I don't know any other job that does that. The newer teachers that are starting now get piddly wages. A lot of them who have been working less than ten years have other jobs. I think they really suffered during the pandemic because they work in restaurants, and that whole industry was impacted."

Asked if there was anything she would like to say to other teachers, she added, "We need to build each other up and stick together. Nobody else is going to come to help us. There is strength in numbers and we are those numbers, and we need to rely on each other."



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