Florida teacher dies while battling COVID-19

Matthew MacEgan
12 March 2021

Last Friday, Carol Zuckerman, a 56-year-old teacher who taught at a school in Broward County, Florida, died while battling COVID-19. According to the latest statistics, there have been over two million confirmed infections and 32,000 confirmed deaths from the virus in Florida. More than 82,000 cases have been reported in K-12 schools, a number that has doubled since the beginning of 2021.

Zuckerman was a single mother of a 10-year-old daughter named Lacey, and taught first grade at Aventura Waterways K-8 Center. Her brother, Charles, said that no one knows where she contracted the virus, but her school had resumed in-person learning under the dictates of Florida's Republican Governor Ron DeSantis and it is entirely possible she contracted the virus at work.

Zuckerman's brother Charles told reporters that his sister was known for her fearless independence: "She was a very active person who had a lot of friends. She was like her grandmother. She had a bit of a gypsy soul. Loved to travel. Had friends wherever she went." She had earned a master's degree in business administration, but chose a career in education instead, with her brother commenting, "She loved kids and wanted them to feel special. Teaching was a very satisfying career for her."

Among the digital memorial posts made by her loved ones were also statements from the parents of her students. One wrote: "My son would always come home and share stories about what she told him about history. She truly cared about our kids, especially their feelings."

Zuckerman is far from the first Florida educator to die as a result of contracting coronavirus. According to the Florida Education Association (FEA), 40 active educators have died from COVID-19 in the state since DeSantis ordered that schools reopen on July 6, 2020. Fourteen of the 40 deaths have occurred since January 1, 2021. These include teachers, maintenance workers, bus drivers, office assistants, custodians, and sports coaches.

Since August 10, when the first schools opened, there have been 1,235 confirmed classroom closings and quarantines across the state. Including weekends and holidays, that's nearly six classroom closings on average per day.

The weekly number of new cases related to public and private K-12 schools over the past two months has ranged from 2,191 to 4,854. During the last week of February, 3,532 new cases were reported among Florida K-12 schools. The state health department reports that Florida leads the nation in the number of cases of infections from COVID-19 variants that have mutated. Among new persons tested, more than 21 percent were found positive for the virus.

Meanwhile, the number of vaccines available across Florida has been limited, with some educators driving long distances chasing rumors that vaccines are available. Graduate students at the University of Florida who are members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) report that their departments are sending around emails with details on such hopeful rumors, and the Graduate Assistant Union has tried to organize carpool rides for teaching assistants to drive 80 miles to Jacksonville in the hope that they can be vaccinated.

News helicopters flying over Miami have shown video footage of very long lines of cars waiting early in the morning for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) site at Miami-Dade College to be opened, and reports are emerging that many who were not eligible under current state guidelines were still able to receive shots there last week.

FEMA insists that they have no control over the guidelines, and that the distribution terms are dictated by DeSantis, who has been implicated in a scheme to

© World Socialist Web Site

distribute vaccines to wealthy, affluent communities. DeSantis announced Tuesday that Florida will be expanding its vaccinations at CVS pharmacies to more than 150 locations.

Florida educators and school staff are eligible to get the vaccine, but child vaccines for COVID-19 are still in development and students under 16 will not be able to get any vaccines at this time. This means that in-school transmission of coronavirus will continue to occur even if teachers are vaccinated, making schools significant vectors for the spread of more infectious and lethal variants of the virus throughout Florida communities.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been over 220,000 confirmed pediatric cases of COVID-19 in Florida, and nearly 8,000 emergency room admissions. There have been a total of 10 pediatric deaths due to COVID-19 in the state.

While new cases and deaths continue to mount, Florida school superintendents have been ruminating in the press about how they would have liked to reopen schools earlier. Broward Superintendent Robert Runcie told NBC 6 in South Florida, “I would’ve opened schools earlier for face-to-face instruction but that’s Monday morning quarterbacking in hindsight.”

Along with Miami-Dade Superintendent Alberto Carvalho, Runcie falsely claims that their reopening has been safe and successful. “So many large districts are here in the state of Florida and we’ve demonstrated that we can open, we can do it safely, and we continue with in-person learning, that’s a good model for the rest of the country.”

Broward County, along with Miami-Dade County, are two of the top six largest school districts in the country. Both closed on March 13, 2020 and were the last in the state to reopen in October. Since October 5, when Miami-Dade reopened, 5,198 students and 2,084 employees have tested positive for COVID-19. Since they reopened on October 9, Broward County has had 2,279 students and 1,627 employees test positive for COVID-19.

Such numbers are of no concern to Runcie and Carvalho, who report that they are planning intensive summer school sessions to allow students to make up for the school days they missed over the past year, and they expect to open fully in the fall of 2021. While both say they will continue insisting on a mask mandate, they report that social distancing rules will be relaxed to allow as many students as possible to come back to classrooms.

Just as Florida has historically served as a testing ground for the gutting of public education, so too is it serving as a testing ground for the homicidal back-to-work and back-to-school policies of the Republicans and Democrats, who are both promoting a herd immunity policy among Florida educators, parents, students and the broader working class. The number of student and teacher infections and deaths will almost certainly continue to increase.

Carvalho told reporters, “I expect the next school year to be at a different level of normalcy, it would not be the old normal, it will be the new normal.” When Runcie and Carvalho describe a new “normalcy” regarding face-to-face learning, they mean that for the ruling class the lives of educators such as Carol Zuckerman are very much an acceptable price to be paid.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site