

110 school bus drivers have died from COVID-19 in the US

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At least 110 school bus drivers have died from COVID-19 in the past year in the US according to the tracker School Personnel Lost to Covid. In total, 1,145 school personnel have died from COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic.

School bus drivers are particularly at risk of infection. School buses have been specifically noted as potential areas of high spread, with students and drivers in a largely closed air system lacking proper ventilation. Air conditioning and heating systems can act as conveyors for the virus, while the lowering windows in freezing or raining weather threatens the health of students and drivers through more conventional illnesses.

From late December to early January, two Southern Regional School District bus drivers in New Jersey died from COVID-19 just weeks after the district switched to remote instruction following a rise in cases on campus and in the community. The district did not release the names of the bus drivers.

In Miami-Dade, Florida school bus driver Donna Blatch died from COVID-19 in February after voicing concern that she was not being informed about which of her students had been sent home to quarantine. She was one of three district employees who died from the virus in a two-week period, passing just four days after testing positive for infection.

In an interview with the news station Local 10, a co-worker of Blatch commented that “The kids are not keeping their mask on their faces, kids are not socially distancing on the bus [and] we are in a closed confined space. They [the district] should treat us with some dignity.”

She continued by saying “I lost my best friend to this COVID. How many more Donna Blatch’s is it going to be before it happens to one of us? We’re scared; we have underlying conditions, we have families with

underlying conditions that we may take this COVID home to our families, and they need to take into consideration when they talk about opening these schools, they need to take our lives in consideration. The teachers can work and do that from home, we can’t do that. So, we are asking for our community, pastors, the governor, and the mayor to help us. Make it safer for these kids and us on these Dade County school buses. We have not got any recognition for what we are doing as bus drivers and we are afraid of losing our lives.”

There are no national statistics on school bus driver infections, but the conditions facing school workers in general provide insight into the potential hazards they face.

According to the National COVID-19 School Response Dashboard, among data collected for 1.5 million school employees between August 31 and February 28, roughly 78,000 school workers have been infected. That is more than five percent of the surveyed school staff infected, and a death rate upwards of 1.5 percent of those infected.

These deaths and many more come at a time when, after cases have been declining nationally for weeks, school districts are starting to see an increase in cases.

These issues have exacerbated the existing general shortage of school bus drivers around the country, making it difficult for districts to fill all positions needed to cover routes. Fayette County Public Schools in Lexington, Kentucky, for example, was forced to delay the reopening of in-person classes earlier this month after the district was only able to fill 229 of 258 driver positions.

According to *School Transportation News*, 20 drivers call out every day while an additional shortage of substitute drivers and mechanics, as well as the

numbers of drivers who have taken leave, has strained the student transportation network. The district has reportedly turned to encouraging other district employees to become licensed drivers to fill the gaps.

School districts have responded to COVID concerns by lowering the capacity of buses and requiring masks. However, drivers have voiced concerns over students' ability to properly wear PPE and social distance. Meanwhile, large outbreaks among bus drivers continue to occur.

In early February, the Perkiomen Valley School District in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania was forced to suspend bus services for several days after 30 drivers and bus aides were infected. One of these drivers, Lynn Himes, died from COVID-19 on February 1 at the age of 57.

A further 20 bus drivers were infected at the same time in nearby Hatboro-Horsham, forcing the district to also suspend bus services for several days.

Just this past week, a further 11 Pennsylvania bus drivers from the Council Rock School District tested positive for the virus. The district announced that families would be informed if their child came into contact with an infected driver, but this may not be fully possible since attendance is not taken on school buses.

Speaking on the outbreak, Superintendent Robert Fraser said in a statement that "We cannot be sure who exactly is riding a bus on days when infection may have been possible, and buses have multiple daily trips to a variety of [Council Rock] schools, non-public schools, and extracurricular activities."

The number of infected could grow in the coming days as well, with seven additional drivers awaiting test results.

Cases among students and staff have been declining along with the overall reduction in cases nationwide. However, with schools across the country opening for in-person instruction, data from the past few weeks offers a concerning picture of the impact of school openings.

In Michigan, nearly 60 schools were added to the list of new outbreaks on March 15 alone, totaling 265 cases for the preceding week. Coronavirus outbreaks in schools are now the single largest category in terms of outbreaks within the state. Students and staff believed to have contracted the virus from outside of school

grounds are not included in Michigan's school reporting.

In Colorado, COVID-19 cases are declining but cases among young children and teens have increased, including an outbreak in mid-February traced to a school bus in the Douglas County School District. Of the 623 new outbreaks reported on March 17, 147 were related to K-12 schools, accounting for a quarter of active outbreaks over the past week.

Minnesota has recorded 7,465 cases among school staff and 8,720 cases among students for a total of 16,185 as of March 18. The Department of Health has also recorded the largest single-week increase in cases related to schools, recording 674 cases on March 18. The weekly report also indicates seven more students and staff have been hospitalized, with at least one in the intensive care unit, and that all these cases have been related to attending or working in a Minnesota school.

The Minnesota school system has also recorded two COVID-19 deaths in the past two weeks, bringing the total to five.

School bus drivers and school workers in general are facing considerable risks as more students return to in-person learning and cases in schools increase. These risks will only grow as states begin to ease pandemic restrictions and new variants of the virus spread.



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