

Texas implements new CDC guidelines in public schools

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Potentially millions of additional schoolchildren in Texas will be packed into classrooms in the few remaining weeks of the school year, with state officials announcing Thursday their total support for the politically-motivated Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) policy that social distancing between students be reduced from six to three feet in K-12 schools.

The city of Austin is pressing ahead with the change, despite COVID-19 test positivity rates ranging from a low of 3.3 percent among preschoolers to as high as 7 percent among middle school students. While rates of infection in schools have fallen recently, the decline generally tracks with closures caused by the recent Texas power crisis. Coronavirus testing rates are also down. The region of Waco, for example, has recently seen the number of daily tests for coronavirus fall by 85 percent over previous peaks.

The Texas government's move, combined with the statewide lifting of the mask mandate earlier this month, jeopardizes the lives and health of millions of educators and schoolchildren. So far, there have been 127,196 confirmed cases of COVID-19 among students and 67,740 among staff statewide.

The endless refrain that these numbers are of little significance because kids get "mild cases" of the illness is cold comfort for the dozens upon dozens of families whose children have died. This logic expresses the callous indifference toward the long-term health consequences of COVID-19 for children, which are poorly understood but initial research indicates can be severe. As for educators, the hundreds among the nearly 48,000 Texans dead from COVID-19 are simply bodies to be stepped over for the politicians and so-called health experts pushing these policies.

The three-foot guideline itself is just a

recommendation that can be violated, with the state explaining Thursday that schools should "*encourage* students to practice social distancing" when it's possible to do so without "*disrupting* the education experience" (emphasis added).

The fact that the state's Republican governor Greg Abbott is implementing the recommendations of the CDC—which was pressured by the Biden administration to distort science in order to meet his political goal of reopening all K-8 schools—underscores the fact that educators and families are confronting a combined assault of both parties of big business.

In an effort to appear as an advocate for educators and schoolchildren, state representative Democrat Shawn Thierry of Houston recently introduced a bill into the state legislature that would require a single school nurse for every 750 students in Texas schools. In reality, Thierry's effort reveals the grotesque character of public education in the state and the total unwillingness of anyone in the political establishment to do anything about it.

Despite the propaganda campaign by the Texas political establishment and the Biden administration, backed by the CDC, teachers unions and other officials, there is still enormous opposition to the reopening policies.

Round Rock ISD parent Adrienne Thiesing recently told ABC News, "I do not feel like it's safe to send my kids in school right now. We're in a pandemic. This is once in a lifetime and I'm OK with having them home for a little while until cases can get down, death rates can get down and we can get everything back in control."

Michael Hull, founder of the Facebook group Teachers Against Dying and member of the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee,

commented, “When they promised me I could go back to my school site and no one would be in the room, I knew they’d keep packing it fuller and fuller, which is what they did. It’s almost like it simmers into a boil.”

He added, “It’s unscientific. On what basis are they using three feet other than to pack the classrooms? We’ve seen studies that show that given the aerosolization, these indoor places aren’t safe. If you add more people, it will become even more unsafe. They’re just doing this to pack the schools and get subsidized day care. They’re creating the very environment that will make the vaccines ineffective with new strains. It’s reckless and immoral.”

In a recent article in the *Texas Tribune*, school nurse Marisa Thomison, who works in the relatively well-staffed Hutto Independent School District, described the extreme difficulties she faces handling contact tracing, comforting young people terrified of contracting the virus, and dealing with parents who are informed they must keep their children home because of an exposure.

Capturing the pressure parents face in this situation, Thomison described the crisis provoked for working families. “It’s the immediate, ‘Oh my God, I have a job. How can I have someone watch my kid? What am I going to do?’”

As vaccinations have increased in concert with Governor Greg Abbott’s rescinding of previous mask mandates, local and national media apparatuses have worked overtime to push the idea of an imminent “return to normalcy.” This crusade to suffocate popular opposition to reckless and unscientific reopening policies will inevitably cost Texans their health and their lives, as more contagious and deadlier variants of coronavirus spread throughout the region, including B.1.1.7 from the UK and B.1.351 from South Africa.

On Monday, March 8, for instance, the Houston Health Department announced that the UK strain was detected in the wastewater of 31 out of the city’s 39 wastewater treatment plants. One month before, on February 8, this same test revealed B.1.1.7 at only 21 of the city’s 39 plants. Wastewater analysis is a particularly powerful technique because it reveals the proliferation of COVID-19 viral shedding regardless of an individual’s symptoms or positive tests.

The reality of the vaccination process in Texas was revealed recently by events at Dallas’ Globe Life Field, a newly-constructed \$1.2 billion baseball stadium.

Because of its central location within the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex and its proximity to large concentrations of working class households, it was identified as a vaccination site. FEMA set a goal of 21,000 vaccinations administered per week with pre-scheduled appointments running seven days a week.

However, the state of affairs at the site started to deteriorate as staffers struggled to address the need of recipients of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines for second doses. In addition to the supply chain problems, logistical and communication problems emerged because the city decided to move the vaccination site to nearby AT&T Stadium so that the Texas Rangers could be the first major league baseball team to play in front of a full-capacity audience since the beginning of the pandemic.

In Tyler, a city in eastern Texas, current school reopening plans include the full in-person resumption of all extracurricular activities, academic and athletic. Additionally, off-campus events such as prom and graduation are back on the agenda without a restriction in sight. Further south in Round Rock, school officials announced the resumption of traditional graduation ceremonies.

At both the national and local level, the unions and other teachers’ associations have worked hand-in-glove with school boards and politicians to force schools to reopen. The only way forward for educators is to organize independently of these organizations, which answer to corporate interests and are bitterly hostile to any sort of mass strike to close schools. We urge all Texas educators, parents, students and workers opposed to the unsafe opening of schools and nonessential workplaces to join the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and become part of the fight to save lives.



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