"Mary was the heart of our school"

Beloved Maryland math teacher dies of COVID-19 after school reopened

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Mary Laurenzano, a math teacher at Bennett Middle School in Fruitland, Maryland, died of COVID-19 on March 22. Laurenzano had returned to her school voluntarily last September, at which point all of her students were still learning remotely. On February 8, some of her students returned for in-person learning under a hybrid model, and on March 9 Laurenzano developed COVID-19 symptoms and went into quarantine. She continued to teach from home right up to the day she succumbed to the virus last week.

Laurenzano taught at Bennett Middle School starting in 2004 and earned numerous accolades and praise for her devotion to her students. In 2018, she was a Wicomico County Teacher of the Year semifinalist and a year earlier was honored by a local television station as a "Teacher Who Makes A Difference."

After being honored in 2018, Laurenzano said, "Every student is capable of being successful, but not all are traditional learners. Many come from homes that don't have the ability to support their child academically." She added, "Educational systems have to be creative in meeting the needs of every student, give equal opportunity for them to try different programs if they are being unsuccessful in a traditional environment. The community has to work together, put aside all of our differences and see the value in working together to help any child realize their potential."

In the 2017 television profile, she said, "I'm thankful for the staff that I have, the peers that I have, because without them we're not able to have good instruction. These guys make it fun, because it's one big family and it's all of the different personalities that make it great."

One of Laurenzano's colleagues told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Mary was the heart of our school. She was the first person to greet me and talk to me on my first day at Bennett Middle School. I've recently learned that many people can tell that same story about her. She was unbelievably devoted to teaching. She was the first person to arrive each day and it was so she could provide math tutoring. She also tutored most afternoons as well."

Laurenzano also helped ensure students had enough to eat. "She always kept snacks in her room and would intervene if ever a student lost or didn't have lunch money," her colleague added. "I've also known her to take care of student lunch debt if the student was being denied lunch."

Dozens of former students and parents took to Facebook to mourn the loss of Laurenzano. One wrote, "I had her in 2008. She was one of the few teachers I knew who would help you with whatever you were having issues with. I never stopped thinking about her… She made my least favorite subject enjoyable."

A parent wrote, "Our whole family is mourning this devastating loss. She nurtured all three of my sons. All of her students are saying that they were her favorite. That's the kind of teacher she was. She made every student feel special, encouraged them to do their best, challenged, teased and coaxed them to try and try again and she did all that with great sense of humor, infinite patience and wisdom."

Laurenzano's death is a direct result of the criminal push by the Biden administration and Maryland's Republican Governor Larry Hogan to reopen schools before the pandemic is contained. A day after Biden was inaugurated, Hogan announced that all Maryland schools should return to at least hybrid instruction by March 1 and threatened action against teachers who did not return. Schools in Wicomico County had been virtual throughout the 2020-2021 school year, but after Hogan's announcement the school system began a rapid reopening in early February.

According to *Education Week*, as of March 23, 2021, at least 906 active and retired K-12 educators and personnel have died of COVID-19, of whom 252 were active teachers. The corporate media, both big business parties, the teachers unions, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have all pushed for school reopenings in order to coax working class parents back into unsafe workplaces to ensure the flow of profits to the major corporations.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) have played an especially filthy role in sending teachers back to school, with AFT President Randi Weingarten telling the *New York Times* last month that she spends 15 hours a day on the phone with the White House,

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the CDC, local mayors and union leaders working to force schools open.

Notably, there is a conspiracy of silence around the cause of Laurenzano's death. Neither Bennett Middle School, the Wicomico County school system, nor published press accounts have even noted that she died of COVID-19. The Wicomico County Education Association (WCEA) has issued no statement at all about Laurenzano's death.

"The newspapers said she died suddenly and was teaching on the day she died," Laurenzano's colleague told the WSWS. "What [they] failed to explain is that she was quarantining at home because of COVID symptoms."

This "wall of silence" by the union, the school system and the corporate media about the cause of Laurenzano's death is a deliberate attempt to conceal the real dangers that the coronavirus continues to represent and is aimed at forestalling teachers and the wider working class from taking action to close schools and prevent further needless sickness and death.

"The general feeling around the school is pain, sadness and anger," said Laurenzano's colleague. "We can all see that they are trying to cover up the fact that she died of COVID from our community. The plan is still to go ahead with the three-foot junk propaganda 'science' which translates to a full face-to-face reopening."

The latter reference is to the CDC's recent revision of social distancing in schools from six to three feet. On March 17, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky made clear in testimony to the House of Representatives that science is being manipulated to serve the ruling class offensive to reopen the schools.

Walensky stated, "As soon as our guidance came out [last month], it became very clear that six feet was among the things that was keeping schools closed, and in that context science evolves." In fact, the science is clear that closing schools is one of the most important public health measures that can be taken to save lives during the coronavirus pandemic.

Another Wicomico County teacher informed the WSWS that the school system will be open for daily in-person instruction in mid-April. The teacher also noted that the school system recently announced that they will no longer accommodate social distancing on school buses.

"Here on the Eastern Shore, it is almost as if COVID is over," the teacher explained. "The only safety measures in schools for now is regular chemical sprays on desks. It's obvious there have been no deep cleanings. My floor hasn't even been swept in weeks. Cleaning in the classroom is solely up to the teacher."

The teacher explained that "distancing was never strictly enforced, so this change to three feet is essentially arbitrary." The teacher also noted that there is no COVID-19 testing available through the school system and the only screening is a "COVID agreement" that parents must sign affirming that their children do not have COVID-19 symptoms.

Regarding the Biden administration's push to reopen, the teacher stated, "Somehow I'm beginning to think I was safer as a teacher under the Trump administration. The CDC is sending two completely conflicting messages: 'variants are coming, everyone stay home' but also 'open schools and allow our children to congregate.' I feel that three feet is closer than most people stood near each other before COVID. It's so close it basically negates distancing all together."

This teacher also reported that 130 students were recently put in quarantine at Wicomico's Snow Hill Middle School due to exposure to COVID-19, apparently stemming from a band class and school buses.

A third Wicomico teacher told the WSWS that a fully vaccinated teacher recently tested positive for COVID-19, marking the third known case in his school since February. He also explained that the school system's policy makes it nearly impossible for a teacher to be identified as a close contact with a student who tests positive.

"To be considered a close contact, you would have to be within six feet of a person for at least 15 minutes," the teacher said. "So even if a student in my class gets COVID, I would not be considered to be a close contact and would not have to quarantine or miss school because technically I was at least six feet away, even though that student is in my class for over 80 minutes and seven feet away from me."

He also explained that at a recent WCEA meeting, the union president said that the school system was rejecting almost all requests for teacher accommodations pursuant to the Americans with Disabilities Act, forcing numerous teachers with high-risk medical conditions to either retire, quit or go on unpaid leave.

Teachers and school staff who want to organize resistance to school reopenings should sign up to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which has local committees in numerous cities and states across the US and internationally. It is only through these safety committees, organized independently of both big business parties and the pro-corporate trade unions, that educators can wage the necessary struggle to shut down schools and prevent further death of teachers, school personnel and students. Sign up today to get involved!

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