"It's not about the kids, it's about profit"

US teachers describe the deadly impacts of COVID-19 on children

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This is part two of a multi-part series of articles featuring interviews with US educators. Part one can be read here. *We encourage all educators, parents and students to share your stories and describe conditions in your district with* educators@wsws.org.

A recent study published in *JAMA Pediatrics* estimates that between 37,300–43,000 children have lost at least one parent due to the COVID-19 pandemic, while millions of children may suffer from long-term complications associated with the deadly and debilitating virus. Additionally, recent data out of the UK found that 10–15 percent of children younger than 16 infected with COVID-19 still had at least one symptom five weeks later. At least 3.4 million children in the US have contracted COVID-19, which is undoubtedly a gross underestimation given the lack of robust testing and reporting of cases among children.

Such staggering data on the impacts of the pandemic on children underscores the hypocrisy of the Biden administration and all politicians who feign concern for the mental health of students and who have distorted science to claim the virus does not significantly impact children in order to reopen schools. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with educators across the US regarding the impacts of the pandemic on children and the propaganda spouted by the corporate media and ruling elite downplaying the deadly character of the virus.

A teacher in Pennsylvania expressed her frustration over the push to reopen schools and the lies that were told to justify this campaign, noting, "It makes me really angry how Biden lied to people. He went up there and he said, 'Children aren't going to get it. If they do it will be mild, it's unlikely that they will get sick from this.' And then parents listened to him and now the schools are filling up again. We are being sacrificed."

Pennsylvania's school districts have all opened under some form of in-person teaching over the past two months. Pennsylvania's Democratic Governor Tom Wolf has been pushing for the reopening of in-person teaching and has reduced the distancing guidelines from six feet to three feet in order to allow districts to bring in more students.

Since the reopening of Philadelphia schools, case counts, positivity rates and hospital loads have all seen increases in Philadelphia and surrounding areas. Overall cases continue to increase in Pennsylvania, with the seven-day average of new infections up over 60 percent from the lows reached in late February and early March.

A teacher in Detroit, Michigan, commented, "I am getting so sick of them saying the kids are having mental problems because they have to work from home. There are a lot of reasons why children have mental problems. I feel strongly that children are entitled to a free education. But they give all these crazy reasons for pushing in-person learning, saying 'they are depressed, they have emotional needs,' and so forth, but that is just making excuses to put pressure on parents to send the kids back."

Michigan is currently embroiled in a new surge of the pandemic, which has already surpassed the peak of the fall/winter surge throughout the state, driven by the more infectious B.1.1.7 UK variant. According to data from the Michigan Department of Public Health, the number one source of COVID-19 outbreaks in the state since mid-February has been K-12 schools. Daily new cases throughout the state have increased over 60 percent in the past two weeks, now reaching a daily case rate of 70.2 per 100,000 people.

A teacher in Norfolk, Virginia, also spoke with the WSWS, saying, "If kids start getting sick, which is what we're going to be seeing, it will have a tremendous impact. I don't understand the 'one-way transmission' idea. It doesn't make sense that kids somehow can't get the virus. I wonder if it's just because we aren't testing the kids. We don't really know how many kids have it, and we won't know what the effects are for years. And now they're saying that there can be neurological damage to people who have been infected."

Under guidelines from Virginia Democratic Governor Ralph Northam, elementary schools in Norfolk, Virginia, reopened in-person on March 15. Middle schools reopened yesterday, with high schools following on April 26. Northam has been an ardent supporter of reopening schools and has pushed to implement the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines to allow three-foot social distancing so that more students can return to classrooms.

During a press briefing in early March, Gov. Northam made the same arguments as the Biden and Trump Administrations in reopening schools, saying, "We know this is important to our children's education and also to their well-being… We're seeing a decline in academic performance, and we're seeing increased

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behavioral problems and mental health issues. So I'm glad that our children are getting back into the classroom because that is where they need to be."

Michael Hull, a former teacher in Texas and founder of the Facebook group "Teachers Against Dying," described conditions in schools across the US that have reopened in person.

"I started the group Teachers Against Dying on Facebook as a protest and I keep in touch with a lot of teachers who tell me that no social distancing is happening, mask breaches are common, whole sports teams are getting quarantined, and letters sent out to parents regarding infections that do not match the number of cases.

"One of the craziest stories was of a cleaning crew disrupting the middle of a class, making everyone get up and wait in the hallway while the room was disinfected. Other stories include kids sitting at a desk with no device and taking notes, only to have to complete work after school on a home computer. Beyond that, several teachers have described long hours, under-staffing, and high truancy, along with constant fear, mental exhaustion, and burnout as they remain under pressure to get high scores on standardized tests and are essentially expected to perform as though a once in a century pandemic isn't happening.

"Perhaps it is true that remote learning cannot be compared to traditional instruction, but it should also go without saying that traditional instruction during a plague cannot be compared to traditional instruction when there is no plague!

"Is the bizarre, stressful, and frightening environment we are subjecting people to, replete with masks, face shields, plexiglass, and social distancing, really conducive to good social interaction and mental health? Is it good for children's mental health when they see parents succumb to an illness that they very well may have been the vector for? Where were all of these 'mental health warriors' as suicide rates and mental health issues rose for several years prior to the pandemic? Where was the concern about the negative psychological effects of high stakes standardized tests and school shooter drills? Mental health is a convenient scapegoat for those who wish to gaslight us into their agenda, which upon critical evaluation is actually more harmful. It's not about the kids, it's about profit."

The WSWS also spoke with **a teacher in Wicomico County, Maryland,** where there has been a media blackout on relating the recent death of a beloved math teacher, Mary Laurenzano, to COVID-19.

The Maryland teacher stated, "There is a sense of disbelief from myself and teachers in my district. There is anger and frustration. Why is no one saying that her death was COVID related? There are articles in the paper that she was so beloved, messages from the school board regarding her viewing and funeral. But it's like a little secret that only teachers know and everybody is talking about, that she had COVID.

"She is the only teacher in our county who has died from it, but I can recall there were national news stories, at least initially, that teachers were dying in other places. As teachers we all know that she was on leave, and working from home because she actually had the virus. This was not a secret but even the Maryland State Education Association isn't even mentioning her death was COVID-related or pushing back against the media. It's a weird silence."

Julia, a teacher in Florida, commented on the impact that the pandemic is having on children, saying, "It's really concerning and scary, and demonstrates how inhumane the society we live in is. The story about the Michigan kid [Dae'Shun Jamison] who had to get amputated was haunting. This child's life is permanently affected by this. And it is concerning that this has been happening particularly to children."

The WSWS has reported on Dae'Shun Jamison, who developed multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) in late December 2020 after having COVID-19 with no symptoms for two weeks. MIS-C cases among children are currently on the rise in the US. Researchers have reported that the majority of young children and adolescents who went on to develop MIS-C had only mild or asymptomatic forms of COVID-19. According to a recent study in *JAMA Pediatrics*, of the 1,000 cases studied, 75 percent did not display coronavirus symptoms.

Julia went on to describe her experience teaching over the past year in Florida, which under fascistic Republican Governor Ron DeSantis has been among the most aggressive in reopening schools since last summer.

She said, "I was working as a tutor at a tutoring center for the majority of 2020, first starting in the classroom and then moving online. When COVID started spreading and schools had to shut down, we switched to online. But the boss just kept trying to force us to keep working. He didn't want to shut down and claimed the tutoring center had less children than public schools, so it was okay to stay open despite overwhelming concern. Broward County was also reporting extremely high case rates at the time. He tried to get tutors to go back for kids that needed extra attention such as disabled children or those with learning problems (ADHD).

"Teachers were eventually forced back later in the year and we eventually returned to the tutoring center again. The center didn't provide masks or wipes to wipe down the tables, so it was really unsafe. I left after we were permitted to move back to online tutoring, which was horrible. The managers forced tutors to work with at least two children at the same time on different devices, which is nearly impossible to provide effective learning and concentrating on those who need help. Also, most of these kids have behavioral disabilities, which requires specific attention that couldn't be provided under those conditions."

To be continued

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