

San Antonio, Texas educator victimized for advocating safety speaks out on her firing

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On May 10, the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) school board voted unanimously to fire Rachell Tucker, a dual language kindergarten teacher at Highland Park Elementary School. The firing took place after Tucker had advocated for increased safety measures and the halting of in-person learning at her school amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, Tucker confirmed that two other teachers, including a tenured teacher, were fired at the same board meeting. She did not know why they were fired, stating, “They didn’t have anyone speaking out for them.”

Tucker was among at least nine teachers in the San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel union who were pressured to resign by the district, bringing the total to 11 known teachers who were either forced to resign or fired, while there are likely others whose stories have not been made public.

Many of the teachers, including Tucker, who were fired or forced to resign were under “probationary contracts.” According to *San Antonio Report*, the SAISD school board voted in August 2019 to discontinue “continuing contracts” starting on September 1 of the same year, leaving probationary and fixed-term contracts as the only contracts under which teachers could be hired past that point. According to a survey at the time, out of 267 districts who responded (roughly a quarter of all districts in Texas), SAISD was the only district that still offered continuing contracts.

“Fixed-term” and “probationary” contracts offer significantly less protection for teachers than “continuing” contracts. The Texas State Teachers Association page on teacher contracts notes that “continuing” contracts, have “an indefinite duration. The contractual rights last until the teacher resigns, retires or is discharged for good cause. There is no need for annual nomination or reappointment.” The other two types of contract are subject to annual or biannual renewal.

Referring to the firings, Tucker stated, “No teachers should have been fired this year given that we had to reinvent the classroom. Nobody should have been fired for performance unless they did something completely heinous.” Prior to the May 10 board meeting, the union held a press conference where they stated that no one should have been forced to resign or fired this year.

Tucker added, “Essentially we are under a teacher shortage; so many decided for safety reasons either to end their careers or not teach this year. Our classrooms, at least in the elementary school, have up to 25 kids, some more, some less.”

Commenting on the chaotic implementation of in-person and hybrid learning models (a combination of in-person and remote learning) mandated by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), Tucker said, “It is my understanding that the district is pushing to not have hybrid learning next school year. Hybrid education was a failed experiment this year, mainly due to the lack of training and support from district personnel and administration. As time went on, as the TEA enforced the tying of attendance to funding, teachers increasingly felt pressured to bring students in. Grades 3-6 were much fuller than the earlier grades earlier on. It was just completely unfair and went against any kind of COVID-19 prevention at all.”

Shortly after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) rescinded their guidance on masking for vaccinated individuals, Texas governor Gregg Abbott banned mask mandates in almost all locales, including K-12 schools, with the anti-masking mandate set to go into effect on June 5 in schools. In SAISD, the school year lasts until June 18, meaning that unvaccinated children and parents will be at heightened risk over the next two weeks. Tucker remarked that “Parents are very scared about that.”

Tucker was fired by the district after a campaign of victimization that involved the use of poor reviews by her administration. She recalled, “My first class of in-person learning was on the 8th of September. On the second day of in-person learning, I started getting negative walk-throughs from my vice principal.” She noted that throughout all the 2019-20 school year, she had two walk-throughs, while this year the figure reached about 12. “I was rated proficient all across the board last year and this year it was completely awful,” Tucker said.

“They built a campaign; they put me on a ‘growth plan.’ I worked with the vice principal, who said I have a ‘classroom management problem,’ and that I was the worst teacher ever even though last year I was rated proficient.

“The vice principal was already knocking me for giving out stickers to students, for trying to explain safety and rules to

students. They started with that, and when I continued voicing safety concerns, they told me to join the school's safety committee, which is essentially a big joke. The vice principal would come up with ideas, while the majority of teachers were so scared that they didn't feel safe to voice their concerns."

Speaking to the oppressive atmosphere in her school, she stated: "It was such a challenge to ask questions, to voice concerns with administration on masks, to ask about how administration is contact tracing. I asked questions like how administration is ensuring our staff are wearing masks, because there were lots of violations, even administration itself; there were two people in a room without masks. Then they told me to be more 'constructive.'"

The district also reportedly cut off many people while they spoke out at board meetings, with Tucker calling it a "silencing action."

Regarding her efforts to document this process of victimization and the actions of the district, she said: "The whole time I have been working with my union, we filed grievances against the 'growth plan,' grievances against the retaliation. The school will claim they didn't do anything and that they didn't retaliate, they have created a paper trail to cover what they really did.

"We've all been coerced into going back to work in these conditions. The first step in this was getting teachers in the building. In SAISD this was a weird process; they had us fill out a declaration form in phases starting August 17, regarding when we wanted to go back in. They wanted teachers to go back into the buildings even if students were not there. Parents trust teachers, and SAISD used this to sell their plan. They claimed they would close the schools when the test positivity rate reached 10 percent, but they didn't do so when they surpassed it in the following couple of weeks."

Referring to the district, she stated, "They put standardized testing, they put profits above human rights."

Commenting on the unscientific and reckless character of the broader school reopening campaign, she said: "The fact that the pandemic, the virus itself, it's airborne and there is science to prove it, it was never accepted by the school district. We had plastic plexiglass dividers, in classrooms and the cafeteria, and the district was claiming we can only contract COVID-19 from droplets and not aerosols.

"They were putting kids in rooms with poor ventilation, in gyms, in my Pre-K and kindergarten class we would have all unmasked kids eating in class. Early on, I gave the suggestion, 'why don't we eat outside?' The CDC basically said we shouldn't congregate in areas. The answer to me was, 'we don't have enough staff for that and how are teachers going to get their 30-minute lunch?'

"It basically illustrates that they knew exactly what they were doing, they just didn't want to put the money in to get more staff, to test the staff, to make sure they are ready to work and ensure we can follow the protocols."

When asked about the role of American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten and her call to fully reopen schools this fall, as well as the CDC's loosening of masking recommendations, Tucker said: "Early on, Weingarten was up in arms when Trump wanted to reopen schools, but after Biden was elected, she was all about it and met with Biden after his election. She met with schools before he was in office and then, when he was in office, they said schools would reopen in the next 100 days. It just goes to show that the 600,000 people that have died, that they mean nothing to them, from our administration at our schools up to the president. And the mask mandate is a continuation of that, putting profits over people."

Referring to the reliance on vaccines by the Biden administration to reopen schools, Tucker stated: "With all the new variants out there, across the world, even here in the US as well, new variants are wrecking certain areas and affecting kids more, and that's not being talked about with the school reopenings. So, it's just a lot of unknowns, and they put all their effort into the vaccination campaign, and that's good, but prevention is still the answer. Switching the burden to individuals is the way to get away with 600,000 people dying. Especially in black and brown communities and those that don't have a choice but to go to work, and in communities that live in fear because they need their jobs, the same as teachers, they are coerced into going to work.

"I wouldn't be surprised through all of this that workers in all sorts of industries are feeling pressure, perhaps PTSD and some mental health issues because of the pandemic and because of the pressure. They have it just as soldiers have it; you have to figure out how to cope with yourself and what the system wanted you to do to keep the economy running even though they know in their heart and their soul it was wrong."



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