

# Alabama schools set to fully reopen as child COVID-19 hospitalizations nearly triple in a week

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A surge of COVID-19 cases is rapidly engulfing Alabama, fueled by the Delta variant, low vaccination rates and the abandonment of all mitigation measures. With schools just weeks away from beginning the year fully in-person as the vast majority of children remain unvaccinated and school mask mandates are being ditched statewide, the fall is on course to be a deadly semester.

Dr. Brytney Cobia of Birmingham summarized the situation to *AL.com*, “All these kids are about to go back to school. No mask mandates are in place at all, 70 percent of Alabama is unvaccinated. Of course, no kids are vaccinated for the most part because they can’t be... So it feels like impending doom, basically.”

There were 1,632 new cases Wednesday, an increase not seen since early February, not including a backlog spike in May. The latest samples run by the University of Birmingham indicate that the Delta variant now accounts for 85 percent of new cases. Hospitalizations doubled over the past week, with 554 hospitalized on Tuesday. Dr. Don Williamson of the Alabama Hospital Association (AHA) told local *WAFF*, “at the rate of expansion that we’ve seen in just the last seven days, we could find ourselves with a thousand people in the hospital by the end of July.”

As of Tuesday, 24 children across the state were hospitalized, up from 9 less than a week ago, according to the AHA. The Alabama chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) wrote the following harrowing description of what is unfolding in the state:

As of 7/8/2021, there have been 50,588 cases of COVID-19 among Alabama youth ages 0-17. The number of new cases of COVID-19 among children per week is increasing and is currently equivalent to the number per week added in the summer of 2020. COVID-19 is not a benign disease among children. Although data in Alabama are limited, across the

United States approximately one out of every 100 children with COVID will require hospitalization. Three hundred and forty-four children across the U.S. have died due to COVID-19, including eight here in Alabama. For those who survive initial infection, approximately three out of every 10,000 will experience a delayed, life-threatening multi-system inflammatory syndrome and up to half of all infected children may experience symptoms of long COVID.

Responding to the new national AAP guidelines, which recommended that all staff and students older than two years old wear masks in schools regardless of vaccination status, Alabama Governor Kay Ivey’s press secretary said, “Governor Ivey believes students need to be in the classroom without any type of mask requirement.”

The Alabama Department of Health has not updated its dashboard for tracking K-12 infections since May 28, despite record numbers of students attending summer school. In the Montgomery school district alone, 12,000 students registered for summer school, up from 2,500 in prior years. Evidence of the virus’ spread is revealed elsewhere. On Monday, *NBC15* reported that the entire football team at Baker High School in Mobile is currently quarantined.

Renae, a Montgomery school teacher, described the current situation to the *WSWS*, stating, “We had an incident recently where a child’s parent called the school and said that everyone in the house tested positive except the child and wanted to know if he could continue to come since he was negative. The secretary told her that she felt like he needed to quarantine since the entire house is positive. It’s possible that he could have been tested too soon. Also, the child could be asymptomatic. The new state guidelines would allow the child to come and not quarantine.”

Renaë added, “If the superintendent was really concerned with our health, they would have made sure that the child quarantined for a couple of weeks and provided the family with the means to do this, but that was openly opposed. Instead, they maintain a public image that everything is being done to protect teachers and students when this is not at all the case. I have had to purchase equipment out of my own pocket.”

Following the lead of Ivey and the entire political establishment, both Democrat and Republican, district superintendents are digging their heads into the sand about the upcoming semester. The superintendent of Baldwin County Public Schools, the county with the second-fastest increase in COVID-19 cases in Alabama, told *NBC15*, “we seem to be healthy and we are going to be moving forward.” Likewise, Alabama Education Association (AEA) board member Jason Clayton said, “I think we will have pockets here and there, throughout the school or your community or the school system of quarantining and stuff like that... It’s just inevitable.”

The spirit of criminal denial was epitomized by President Biden at a CNN town hall meeting in Ohio on Wednesday when he said incredibly, “This is not a pandemic.” An increasingly common refrain among the ruling class, including by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky, is to blame the ongoing pandemic on adults who have not been vaccinated. That the pandemic has been allowed to spread uninhibited the world over is the sole responsibility of capitalist governments that have demanded that children return to classrooms and workers return to factories.

Besides the fact that the vast majority of the world’s population does not have access to the vaccine, even within the US there remain material barriers to vaccination. A recent report by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that areas with a high Social Vulnerability Index and higher poverty levels have lower vaccination rates. In any case, that confusion and hesitancy do exist about the vaccine is a direct outcome of the failure by the politicians and public health officials to invest in a massive public education campaign.

Alabama currently has the lowest vaccination rates in the US, with just 33.8 percent fully vaccinated, according to the CDC. The Alabama Department of Health data shows that just 5.2 percent of children ages 0-17 have begun a vaccine course. Overall, vaccinations have stagnated over the summer, with an average of just 4,800 doses per day administered over the past week.

Students who wish to attend school remotely have had to submit special applications to their districts. “Virtual Academies” are offered on a district-wide basis, though seats are limited and, in some cases, only available to certain

age groups or to students in good academic standing. Teachers are employed by outside education technology companies that seek to profit off of the demand for remote learning.

Statewide, there is a serious teacher shortage. Already a problem before the pandemic, retirements among Alabama teachers in 2020-21 reached their highest level in a decade. Roanoke City Schools Superintendent Chuck Marcum told *AL.com* that five percent of the district’s workforce retired, mainly “due to pandemic stress.” He believed that as the shortage persists, more and more teachers will be teaching subjects out of their fields of expertise through emergency certification.

Ostensibly to recruit and train math and science teachers, in May Governor Ivey signed into law the Teacher Excellence and Accountability for Math and Science Act. Baited with higher salaries and a \$5,000 stipend, teachers who sign up for the program must voluntarily give up their tenure and employment protections.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party insist that halting all nonessential production and in-person schooling is a necessary measure to eradicate the pandemic once and for all. Combined with widespread testing, contact tracing and full income protection to affected workers and small-businesses, there must be a massive investment in remote learning infrastructure and resources to provide the highest quality virtual education to all students.

Renaë, the Montgomery school teacher, rightly emphasized “the need for teachers to continue organizing the work of independent rank-and-file educator committees, as the Alabama Education Association is not doing anything to really protect its members.”

Indeed, it was the independent, determined action by Alabama educators last school year, culminating in the formation of the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, that forced the Montgomery school district to temporarily switch to fully remote learning and teaching. Alabama educators, parents and students must continue to build and expand the committee in preparation for the fall semester and the struggles to come.



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