

# Tennessee schools face state threats over mask mandates

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Tennessee's two largest school districts' attempts to protect more than 200,000 students, teachers and staff from COVID-19 face threats of funding cuts from state officials.

Memphis/Shelby County and Nashville/Davidson County school systems have implemented mandatory mask wearing for students, teachers, staff and anyone else entering schools and school buses. Memphis schools open today, August 9, and Nashville schools tomorrow, August 10.

Memphis established the policy some time ago for this school year while Nashville's school board approved the policy by an 8-1 vote on Thursday. As of this writing, Nashville and Memphis are the only two school systems in the state to have such mandates.

A high-ranking state official immediately shot back that he would ask the governor for a special session of the state legislature to create what amounts to an emergency voucher program for those opposed to school mask mandates.

"I'm going to ask the governor for legislation to allow those parents in those school districts to take their money through school choice and to go wherever they deem they need to go," House Speaker Cameron Sexton told the *Tennessean*.

Memphis, one of the poorest cities of its size in the United States, has 223 schools serving 113,198 students, far and away the largest K-12 public school system in the state. Nashville follows with 168 schools and 85,500 students. Following a distant third is Knox County (Knoxville) where masking in the schools is optional. It has 91 schools and 61,545 students.

When schools open, state officials could have a sword of financial destruction held over the heads of the two districts. The threat of funding cuts is directed against mask mandates, remote learning, or any effort

to "segregate classrooms based on who has and hasn't been vaccinated," the *Tennessean* newspaper reported last week.

"Any such action for the 2021-22 school year may result ... in a special legislative session where lawmakers could vote to let parents move taxpayer money from public to private schools," the newspaper added.

Such threats must be taken seriously. Governor Bill Lee and the state legislature have in the recent past approved legislation that gave Lee dictatorial powers over school closings.

A bill was passed in April in response to a conflict between Governor Lee and the Nashville and Memphis public schools when the school districts refused to offer face-to-face instruction due to the pandemic. Both would ultimately bow to the pressure after the legislature threatened to cut off funding.

"The law effectively circumvents the power of health departments to close schools, while also granting school boards and charter schools' governing boards the power to keep schools open, regardless of the health risks," the WSWS reported at the time. "The governor can then veto the decision of school boards through an executive order, in effect ensuring that schools remain open."

Although the Republicans have large majorities in both houses of the state legislature, the Democrats offered virtually no resistance, and almost half of Democrats in the state senate voted for the measure.

Sexton's proposal for "school choice" is another transparent effort to accomplish the gutting of public education and reward private and charter school owners. Governor Lee has also gone to court twice and twice lost, attempting to establish a voucher program in Nashville and Memphis over the objection of local

school officials.

Lee and Sexton claim to be acting in the interest of “individual” rights. But they are only interested in schools as day care centers for parents forced back in work. Without their labor there are no profits and dividends.

What about the rights of the teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria workers and school maintenance workers who don’t want to bring disease and death home to their loved ones? And what about parents who want their children in safe classrooms and not have to fear the effects of COVID-19 hospitalizations and “Long Covid” on their children?

The fight to protect these children and all children is the work of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees being formed in Tennessee and across the world.

Requiring the use of masks in school is only one public health measure necessary to battle the virus. School officials have said nothing about the need for testing, air-purification systems and drastically improved ventilation. Many classrooms have windows that don’t open, and students have been taught in basement rooms with no windows, parents said.

Teachers know this. A survey of 756 teachers by the Metro Nashville Education Association (MNEA) showed that a majority of those teachers surveyed, 58 percent, felt “unsafe” with present guidelines making mask wearing optional.

“We’ve been through a terrible 18 months, but we’ve worked hard to protect ourselves,” said Bev Whalen-Schmeller, school psychologist for MNPS. “Now the Delta variant is more deadly than any before. We can’t risk losing everything because of carelessness in reopening schools. Masks should be required.” The survey also found that nearly 66 percent of teachers wanted a mask mandate.

“The pandemic is not over,” a union official told the media. “The Delta variant is more dangerous. Children have already died. Given that, it’s unconscionable that the district would fail to act to prevent it from happening here.” But to date the teachers’ unions, the MNEA, the Tennessee Educators Association (TEA) and the National Educators Association (NEA), have not offered any way to fight back.

There is no doubt that both cities are in another surge. The Tennessee COVID-19 Dashboard indicated the

following: as of August 6, Shelby County has had a total of 107,773 cases with 1,753 deaths. On Friday there were 618 new cases. As of August 6, Davidson County has had a total of 94,683 cases and 972 deaths. On Friday, there had been 388 new cases. In both counties the number of cases has roughly doubled every two weeks and there is no end in sight.



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