

Schools across Southern US reopen as COVID patients flood hospitals

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School districts across the Southern United States have reopened against the backdrop of a widening coronavirus pandemic that has infected tens of thousands, filling hospitals to capacity and leaving them in desperate need of emergency personnel and equipment. This includes pediatric hospitals, which in many areas have more patients than at any other time during the pandemic.

Within days of reopening, school districts across the region reported thousands of COVID-19 infections and many reverted to short-term virtual instruction. Nevertheless, the ruling class, spearheaded by the Biden administration and Republican-controlled state governments, remains steadfast that in-person schooling must resume, sacrificing children's lives for corporate profit as their parents go back to work.

Educators and parents are irate and desperate as they watch children subjected to dangerous conditions. On social media, teachers have circulated petitions in an attempt to pressure politicians and superintendents to enforce mitigation strategies at the least or shut down in-person learning altogether.

In the comments section of these petitions, many parents plead desperately for virtual learning options, which have been almost totally scrapped across the country.

One signer wrote on a Texas petition, "Governor Abbott is putting future Texans in danger. He claims to be pro life and care about children. I guess that only applies to unborn children. Many kids that are here now will die because of his direct actions. He should be held accountable for any deaths that occur under his failures."

Another commented, "What will happen in public schools in Texas during the next Covid outbreak after Governor Abbott says there will be no virtual classrooms? And will he and others be held accountable for the carnage?"

It must be stressed that the policies of the Democratic Party led by President Biden are responsible for emboldening the right-wing attacks on science and public health measures being carried out in Republican states.

Biden's economic adviser Brian Deese admitted that the real priority in reopening schools is the "labor shortage" due to a lack of "child care and school." It was under Biden's administration that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention called for vaccinated people to throw off their masks, despite having definitive proof that vaccinated people contract and spread the virus.

Within days of reopening, districts in the region reported

hundreds of cases, outbreaks and school closures. In New Orleans, where masks are required, 116 active cases were reported on Monday, and 638 students and staff were quarantined, even before all campuses have opened. Despite school being in session, the Louisiana Department of Health has yet to resume its weekly K-12 COVID-19 case tracker.

In Mississippi, with many districts not reporting, 841 students and 347 staff have tested positive since August 1. For the week ending August 6, 4,435 students were quarantined.

In Georgia, districts across metro Atlanta reported hundreds of cases only days after school started. Gwinnett County Schools reported 166 cases in just two days. Dr. Cherie Drenzek, an epidemiologist with the Georgia Department of Public Health, told 11Alive that there has been a 100 percent increase in cases of children ages 5-17 over the past two weeks.

As the petitions by educators and parents indicate, there is widespread hostility to reopening schools. In Duval County, Florida (Jacksonville) 96 teachers were absent on the first day of school, up from the 80 that were absent on the first day in the last school year.

Throughout the South, hospitals are overwhelmed. Mississippi, Georgia, Florida and Louisiana accounted for more than 40 percent of all hospitalizations nationwide on August 5, according to the Associated Press. In New Orleans, a heart attack victim was "bounced from six hospitals before finding an emergency room that could take him," reported National Public Radio.

Mississippi State Health Officer Dr. Thomas Dobbs warned on Twitter on Monday that the state expects 500 new hospitalizations in the coming days but that there will be no room for these patients: "we have ZERO ICU beds at Level 1-3 hospitals, and we have > 200 patients waiting in ERs for a room." Similarly, Florida surpassed 15,000 hospitalizations on Tuesday, the highest number to date during the pandemic.

Supplies are low in Florida, which requested 300 ventilators from the federal government this week after the state stockpiles were exhausted, according to a Department of Health and Human Services document obtained by ABC. Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, who claimed to be unaware of the request, has banned mask mandates in schools and threatened to withhold funds from school districts which defy him. Florida currently has the highest number of children hospitalized from COVID of any state.

In Texas, while pursuing a similar policy of banning school mask mandates, Republican Governor Greg Abbott pleaded for out-

of-state personnel assistance as hospitals are overwhelmed. He also requested that the Texas Hospital Association postpone elective medical procedures. School districts across the state are defying his mask ban, and he faces multiple lawsuits to overturn the ban.

Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson was forced to backtrack after signing a bill into law banning state and local mask mandates. Now that it is enacted, he must wait on the bill to be amended or for the courts to rule the ban unconstitutional. On Tuesday, only eight ICU beds were available across the state.

The Southern US has some of the lowest vaccination rates in the country. According to Our World in Data, less than 40 percent of the population in the states of Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Arkansas and Georgia are fully vaccinated. Florida and Texas have slightly higher rates with 49 percent and 46 percent fully vaccinated, respectively. In Louisiana, only 13 percent of eligible children (12- to 17-year-olds) are vaccinated. Just 25 percent of eligible 12- to 15-year-olds nationwide have been fully vaccinated, according to CDC data.

Pediatric hospitals are also at a breaking point. Dr. Mark Kline, physician-in-chief of Children's Hospital New Orleans, which serves patients from across the Gulf Coast, told Good Morning America that the hospital is awaiting federal medical personnel to assist with a staffing shortage: "We were thin already, having lost a number of staff over the course of 2020. ... Louisiana and the region as a whole have a real dearth of professionals."

Speaking to WDSU, Dr. Kline said that half of the 18 children currently admitted in his hospital are under two years of age. The test positivity rate for Louisiana children is 25 percent. He noted that he was "very concerned" that schools are opening now and feared "the mitigation measures we have used in the past, including masking, social distancing and hand-washing, aren't going to be as effective for this virus."

Nationwide, 93,824 child COVID-19 cases were reported for the week ending August 5, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, and children represented 15 percent of all new cases.

Exposing the lie that reopening schools during a pandemic is in the best interests of children's mental and social well-being, data continues to pour in about the long-lasting effects of even "mild" or asymptomatic COVID-19 infections. Speaking on the effects on children of Long COVID, including on school performance, Dr. Avindra Nath, chief of infections of the nervous system at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, told the *New York Times*, "I mean, they're in their formative years. Once you start falling behind, it's very hard because the kids lose their own self-confidence too. It's a downward spiral."

Additionally, recent data published in *The Lancet* indicates that brain damage due to COVID-19 infections can be comparable to stroke for hospitalized patients or lead poisoning for those who have respiratory difficulty but do not require hospitalization.

In the coming weeks, as districts continue to reopen in the South and across the US, educators will once again be thrust into struggle—against the Biden administration that insists schools must be open, against Republican politicians who outlaw mitigation strategies in schools and against the fraudulent organizations that claim to represent educators.

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten and National Education Association President Becky Pringle have insisted that schools reopen fully in-person. Last year, as teachers across the country died in the hundreds, if not thousands, neither organization lifted a finger to mobilize their millions of members in a nationwide strike to prevent school reopenings and needless death. The hundreds of wildcat walkouts and protests across the US were systematically isolated, while local chapters worked diligently to pressure and demoralize teachers who sought assistance. No confidence or hope can be placed in these organizations.

Educators must learn the lessons of the last school year in order to prepare for this one. Above all, they must recognize that to win requires building new organizations, independent of the trade unions and the capitalist political parties. As the Socialist Equality Party wrote in its statement "Don't send children into unsafe schools!" teachers and parents should form rank-and-file committees to stop the drive to reopen the schools and save the health and lives of the children and school workers.

On May 1, the International Committee of the Fourth International launched the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to organize workers in a common offensive to exert their collective strength, change the course of the pandemic and put an end to the needless suffering and death. The call for the closure of schools and nonessential workplaces until the pandemic is contained must be popularized in every school, factory, workplace and neighborhood across the US and globally. Preparations must be made in every country for nationwide general strike action to coalesce in a globally coordinated strike movement.

Educators, parents and all workers who agree with the demand to shut down in-person learning until the pandemic is eradicated should sign up today to build a rank-and-file committee in your area. There is no time to lose!



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