13-year-old in Mississippi dies of COVID-19 days after school reopens

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16 August 2021

On Saturday, 13-year-old Mkayla Robinson died of COVID-19 in Raleigh, Mississippi, after testing positive for the virus the day before. Her death coincides with a record 1,900 children currently hospitalized with the disease in the United States.

Mkayla was an eighth grader at Raleigh Junior High, part of the Smith County school district, which began the semester on August 6 with no mask requirement. On August 10, due to a rapid spread of the virus, the district announced a mask mandate. By Friday, the day Mkayla tested positive, the district reported 76 known cases among students and 11 among staff. Local news reports say Mkayla attended classes until at least Wednesday.

Her death was announced on the Raleigh High School Lion Pride Band's Facebook page.

"It is with great sadness, and a broken heart, that I announce the passing of one of my 8th grade band students," the post read. "She was the perfect student. Every teacher loved her and wanted 30 more just like her."

As the news spread across social media, educators, parents and community members throughout the US expressed horror at the child's needless death, with a sober recognition that more are to follow.

One person wrote, "My GOD. What are we doing? Why are we even opening schools right now?"

Another said, "So unacceptable. This division has to stop. It was bad enough watching grownups battling each other over their political views but now children are in the crossfire. This is not about a 'personal freedom.' It's a PANDEMIC. Science and medicine. Our politicians must get out of the way and support the actual experts."

There is also growing anger among the broader sections of the population as the pandemic is allowed to spread by the ruling class and politicians of both capitalist parties. Just as the *BMJ* (formerly the *British Medical Journal)* wrote in an editorial earlier this year, accusing governments around the world of "social murder" in their pandemic responses, the working class is drawing similar conclusions.

One comment read, "Kind of makes the Governor a murderer doesn't it? These are our children's lives these guys are playing politics with and killing…"

Mississippi Republican Governor Tate Reeves demonstrated the callousness of the ruling class at a Friday press conference, where he said COVID-19 in children amounted to "the sniffles" and could not recall how many children in the state have died from the disease.

"Does it happen from time to time? Sure it does. I believe we have had one fatality of an individual, maybe it could've been two—I think there's three under the age of 18 at this time? Two?" Behind him, Mississippi State Health Officer Dr. Thomas Dobbs corrected him that four children had died. Mkayla became the fifth child in the state to die from the disease.

Statewide, the situation is critical. Last week, Dr. Alan Jones of the University of Mississippi Medical Center (UMMC) warned during a press conference that if the state continued its current trend, "Within five to seven to ten days, I think we're going to see a failure of the hospital system in Mississippi."

On August 11, 1,490 COVID-related hospitalizations were recorded in Mississippi, passing the January peak of 1,444. Nearly every day since, the record continues to be broken, with 1,537 patients hospitalized as of Sunday. Beds are full at Children's of Mississippi, the only pediatric hospital in the state. On Monday, 22 children were hospitalized and three were in the ICU,

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according to the UMMC website.

Officials are currently erecting a second field hospital in a parking garage near the Children's hospital, with the assistance of a religious charity. They have requested federal personnel to staff the additional space, as more than 2,000 medical professionals have left the field over the past year, according to *Mississippi Today* .

Since schools across the state began to reopen in early August, the Department of Health has reported 841 student infections and 347 staff/faculty infections. More than 4,000 students have been quarantined.

Many districts and schools have already announced short-term closures. In Hancock County, four schools are temporarily closed due to outbreaks. Pearl River County switched the entire school district to virtual instruction for two weeks, after 40 percent of the high school was quarantined. Two schools in George County and Stone County also sent students home for two weeks.

Across the southern US, school districts continue to reopen while children become infected and hospitalized in record numbers. In neighboring states, data on school outbreaks is suspiciously absent. In both Louisiana and Alabama, where schools reopened in early August, the health departments' K-12 trackers have yet to resume weekly reports. The Alabama K-12 COVID-19 dashboard will not be updated until mid-September.

Nevertheless, Al.com reports that at least two schools have sent the student body home for quarantine, and Alabama State Superintendent Eric Mackay told the state school board, "We know we've had hundreds of children sent home already this week. And we've had dozens of teachers sent home." After just two days of classes, the Cullman City Schools District notified parents of 50 confirmed cases among students.

In another tragic example of the increasing death toll among children, a 16-year-old in Lancaster County, South Carolina, died from COVID-19 on August 12, days before his school district reopened. His name has not been released.

Lancaster County School District Superintendent Jonathan Phipps told CNN that there were already 21 students and 20 staff infected with COVID-19 prior to the first day of class. He added that many staff would be absent for the first day.

Phipps stated, "We are starting school with classes being taught by substitute teachers, administrators are stretched for supervision, buses are doing double routes, maintenance workers are working over[time] to cover those out and we canceled last week's preseason football game at one of our high schools due to eight positive cases with our players."

In addition to an executive order signed by South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster banning mask mandates in schools, the state legislature has also threatened to withhold funding from school districts if more than 5 percent of their students enroll for virtual learning.

The deaths of Mkayla Robinson and the teenager in South Carolina portend a horrific semester to come for the tens of millions of schoolchildren in the US who are being forced into crammed and poorly ventilated buildings. The infections that spread inside classrooms will have widespread consequences for the general population.

The official debate underway on whether children should wear masks in schools obscures the more critical reality, which is that under conditions of the rapid spread of the accelerating global pandemic, heightened by the now-dominant Delta variant, there is no safe schooling aside from 100 percent remote instruction.

Parents, educators and other workers who agree with this perspective should read the recent statement by the Socialist Equality Party, "Don't send children into unsafe schools!" and sign up below to join or build a rank-and-file committee in your school district.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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