

On first day back to school, five Fayette County, West Virginia students test positive for COVID-19

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Within hours of opening for the school year this past Tuesday, Fayette County Schools identified five positive COVID-19 cases among its student body.

The cases are spread across grade levels, with two at Oak Hill High School, one at New River Intermediate School, one at Oak Hill Middle, and one at the PreK-8 elementary school in Fayetteville, a small town of 2,800 people about an hour south of the state capital, Charleston.

All of the schools remain open Wednesday and county superintendent Gary Hough suggested none of the students in proximity to those who tested positive will need to quarantine. Hough told local news station WOAY Channel 4 on Tuesday evening that all five cases were “athletic related” but “diagnosed very early.” Contact sports have involved vaccinated and unvaccinated children alike in training practices ahead of the school year.

The widespread nature of the cases suggests transmission throughout the community rather than an isolated cluster. The situation also portends a massive spread of the virus in Fayette County and in every other county in the state as schools reopen.

In fact, Fayette County was already the site of a Delta outbreak, in the Hilltop nursing home where all residents have been vaccinated. As of August 13, 38 residents tested positive along with 17 staff members. Four residents have died of the virus.

In addition, Fayette County is the location of the state’s only maximum security prison, the Mount Olive Correctional Complex, where an unknown number of inmates have contracted coronavirus since the beginning of the pandemic. The state Division of Health and Human Resources reports dozens of deaths

at the penitentiary, where inmates were still waiting on vaccinations in late March.

With high rates of COVID-19 “comorbidities” like obesity, smoking, and diabetes, the population of West Virginia, one of the poorest states in the union, is exceedingly vulnerable to complications from the disease.

Vaccination rates in some counties have stagnated at barely thirty percent, and basic measures like testing and contact tracing are next to nonexistent. In Fayette County, only 25.7 percent of the population has been fully vaccinated.

Other counties are far lower. Roane County, for example, has a vaccination rate of only 4.8 percent, essentially creating a situation comparable to regions of the developing world where vaccines have yet to reach.

Students return to public schools this week and next across the state of West Virginia, where Republican Governor Jim Justice has offloaded decision-making and responsibility for safety policies to the discretion of local school boards and superintendents.

In-person instruction and optional masking are the rule, not the exception, even in counties where infection rates are already high. Many schools do not even have a nurse on staff to test children who exhibit symptoms of sickness.

Justice hemmed and hawed over rising case numbers Monday after the DHHR reported 1,400 new cases since his press conference Friday. Of those cases, over 300 required hospitalization, 127 in intensive care units. West Virginia’s active cases have shot up sevenfold in the last month, from 1,084 in mid-July to over 7,000 this week.

Treating the virus as a personal, family matter, Justice

has refused to implement a statewide mask mandate for students, let alone mandate remote learning until the Delta variant is brought under control. Instead, he called on “parents and grandparents” to talk to their teenaged relatives going back to school about getting vaccinated. “If your children are headed back to school and they’re not vaccinated, that’s not good.”

Justice’s handwringing is poor cover for the criminal indifference the political establishment toward the health of public school children, and indeed, the entire working class population.

On Monday, a group of parents in Cabell County threatened to sue state officials over the lack of consistent safety measures in the schools unless the Justice administration implemented clear standards. Cabell and its county seat of Huntington is one of the largest metropolitan areas of the state; its vaccination rate stands at only 20.4 percent and it has seen a death rate of 198 per 100,000, nearly 20 percent higher than the state average. Nevertheless, the Cabell County school district states that student masking is a “personal decision,” even on buses and other crowded areas.

The Office of the Governor fired back a contemptuous formal response the next day: “You certainly possess political ambition, but to my knowledge are not an expert in medicine or health, epidemiology, vaccine development, logistics, strategic planning or any other area that might be a useful base of expertise from which to make sound recommendations to the Governor.”

“We do not believe entering into dialogue with you on these matters will benefit the students of this state,” the governor’s office declared.

The reopening of schools would not have been possible without the assent of the teachers unions, the West Virginia Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia. Both are infamous for their betrayal of a rank-and-file rebellion of the state’s teachers in 2018, which sparked a wave of strikes by teachers in cities and states across the country.

In the lead-up to the spring semester in January, the teachers unions sought to divert opposition to reopenings through various toothless legal challenges which went nowhere. Now, however, the reopening of schools is passing virtually without any comment at all by the unions. The WVEA’s website has only one

anodyne statement referring to the potential for infections in schools, noting, without comment, that decisions over mask mandates are being made at the local level. WVEA President Dale Lee clearly indicated his support for reopening schools in the statement, “We have consistently said, there is no substitute for in-person learning *in a safe environment* [emphasis in the original].”

In another statement, the WVEA patronizingly calls on the public to “thank West Virginia educators for all they did to reimagine public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic,” referring to the latter in the past tense. The statement is part of a public relations campaign by the WVEA being conducted under the dishonest and misleading slogan, “We Did All This, Together.”

The support for reopenings by the unions shows the need for educators to organize themselves independently of the WVEA and AFT-WV by forming rank-and-file safety committees to educate the public and their colleagues about the dangers posed by the Delta variant and to demand a shutdown of in-person learning until the coronavirus has been contained.



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