

As US hospitalizations surpass 100,000

# Florida teacher with leukemia dies from COVID-19 after being forced to return to class

**Kevin Reed**  
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Kelly Peterson, a Florida elementary school teacher, died on Monday from complications due to COVID-19. She was 41 years old and had been undergoing treatment for leukemia. Kelly's doctor had advised her not to be vaccinated.

Peterson taught fifth grade math and science at Lake Shipp Elementary School in the Polk County Public Schools and contracted the virus after returning to the classroom on August 10. Dozens of tributes to the beloved teacher and condolences to her family were posted by coworkers and parents of students on social media recognizing Peterson as an “amazing” and “awesome” educator.

Kelly's sister Christy Peterson told KTVU, “Because her leukemia was so bad at this point, their concern was by getting the vaccine that potentially could put too much stress on her body.” Christy said her sister had considered going against the doctor's orders and getting the vaccine before school started, but decided to hold off. “She had voiced concerns many times that if she contracted COVID, she was afraid that it would kill her, and unfortunately that's what happened.”

During the previous school year, Peterson had worked remotely, but was forced to return to in-person learning this year despite being immunocompromised. Christy Peterson told *The Ledger*, “With all the COVID cases this year and her medical situation, she should have been a virtual teacher this year. The school didn't offer that. She did do everything she could to stay safe. She took all the precautions, always wore a mask, but, yes, in the end it wasn't enough.”

Polk County Public Schools, located approximately 50 miles southwest of Orlando, is the seventh-largest district in the state and does not have a mask mandate. After just one week into the new school year, 343 students and 198 staff in the district had verified or suspected cases of COVID-19 and 2,200 students and 137 staff had been quarantined.

Along with the passing of Kelly Peterson, another Polk County Public Schools employee, Purcell Elementary School paraeducator, Norma Reyes, also died from COVID-19. Reyes' family said she contracted the virus at home before school began.

Even while the number of cases were skyrocketing across Florida over the past two months from the deadly surge of the Delta variant, the Polk County School Board voted unanimously in July to remove any mitigation measures such as a mask requirement at the district's 150 schools, with more than 100,000 enrolled students. Republican Governor Ron DeSantis has threatened to cut off state funding from school districts that implement mask mandates.

The catastrophic impact of the Delta variant combined with the criminal policies of the DeSantis administration is evident in Polk County, which, during the week of August 13-19, had 6,983 new cases and a 28.9 percent COVID-19 positivity rate.

As the number of deaths from COVID-19 have now climbed to more than 1,000 per day and hospitalizations have surpassed more than 100,000 across the US—the last time this happened was in January 2021—Florida has emerged as the national epicenter of the pandemic, with more people catching the virus, being hospitalized and dying in the state than at any previous period of the pandemic.

On Wednesday, the *New York Times* reported an average of 227 virus deaths per day in Florida, with the average number of daily confirmed new cases reaching more than 23,000. This is 30 percent higher than the previous peak in January.

The current national surge is largely concentrated in the poorest states in the US, especially in the South, where hospitals are being overwhelmed by COVID-19 patients. Alabama and Arkansas have completely run out of ICU

beds, and Mississippi has opened a field hospital in a parking garage to treat patients.

Nearly all of the new cases of the virus in the US are being caused by the Delta variant and a growing proportion of those being hospitalized and dying are coming from younger segments of the population. According to the *Times*, “The Delta variant is spreading among younger people, many who thought they were healthy and did not get vaccinated... Of those who have died, including patients ranging in age from their 20s to their 40s, more than 90 percent were not inoculated.”

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, with the opening of the new school year, a staggering 180,000 students tested positive for COVID-19 between August 12 and August 19. The deadly impact of reopening schools amid the surge is evident in Mississippi, with total confirmed child coronavirus cases rising from 38,000 at the end of July to more than 180,000 last week.

Child COVID-19 deaths in Mississippi have doubled in a month, reaching six. The death of a child under the age of 5 was confirmed on Wednesday. On August 13, M’Kayla Robinson, a 13-year-old eighth-grader at Raleigh High School in Raleigh, Mississippi, died of COVID-19. She had fallen sick three days earlier. Justin Waddell, M’Kayla’s father, said, “We’ve never seen anything happen like this in three days. It was a shock to everybody. The whole family.”

Pediatrician Dr. Anita Henderson, who works at the Hattiesburg Clinic, told CBS News that the pandemic’s impact on kids is a “freight train” that is overrunning the health care system. “We’re seeing in our pediatric population kids who can’t play the flute anymore, kids who can’t participate in sports anymore, and that’s heartbreaking,” Henderson said. Fewer than one-third of Mississippians have been vaccinated.

In another devastating tragedy, 32-year-old Haley Richardson of Theodore, Alabama—who was a labor and delivery nurse and almost seven months pregnant—tested positive for COVID-19 and was admitted to the hospital on August 8. Ten days later, Haley lost her unborn daughter on August 18. She died two days later, on August 20.

All of these horrific and entirely preventable COVID-19 deaths are the result of the “herd immunity” policy of the US corporate and political establishment, which rejects any scientifically grounded effort to eliminate and eradicate the pandemic, including lockdowns and school closures. The reopening policy pursued by Trump has been continued by Biden, who has doubled down on the push for in-person learning in schools even as cases and deaths continue to rise.

Over the past 19 months, nearly 4.5 million people around the world have died and 215 million have been infected—according to official government statistics. Millions

who have survived infection will suffer from the consequences of “long COVID.” This is the outcome of the ruling elite’s rejection of public health precautions in the interests of maintaining capitalist wealth accumulation.

As explained by Dr. Małgorzata Gasperowicz of the University of Calgary during the *World Socialist Web Site* online forum last Sunday, the virus could have been successfully eliminated within 37 days during the first wave of the pandemic in 2020 through the application of aggressive public health measures. Even now, such emergency action, Dr. Gasperowicz said, can eradicate the virus within two months.

However, it is clear that the Democrats and Republicans in the US and the major capitalist regimes in Europe have rejected the measures advocated by the scientists and epidemiologists and are hell-bent on blocking any restrictions on economic activity or school closures.

As explained by the *World Socialist Web Site* yesterday, “The social force blocking a rational and scientific approach to the pandemic is the capitalist ruling elite. It is the working class—educators, parents, autoworkers, logistics workers, health care workers and the entire working class internationally—that must be organized and mobilized to put an end to the needless suffering produced by the pandemic.”

At the center of this movement by the working class to put an end to the pandemic must be the formation of independent rank-and-file committees in every factory, office, neighborhood and school to coordinate and organize the fight to shut down schools and workplaces, stop the spread of the virus and save lives.



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