

As Texas COVID-19 cases and deaths climb, governor forbids vaccine mandates

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August 26 saw Texas running second to Florida in new COVID-19 cases, with 17,642, and leading in new deaths with 261. According to the Texas Department of Health Services as of that date, more than 2.9 million cases have been reported in the state, and more than 54,400 people have died.

On the same day, the Texas Supreme Court temporarily blocked a mask mandate declared for San Antonio's public schools. The judges overrode a ruling the week before by the Fourth Court of Appeals that had allowed local officials to reinstate a mask mandate in Bexar County, where the San Antonio Independent School District (ISD) is located.

Building on this irrational and calamitous ruling, the same day Governor Greg Abbott issued an executive order prohibiting government entities from requiring vaccinations. The order also bars the agencies from requiring customers or patrons to provide COVID-19 vaccination status or proof of vaccination.

Already, as reported on the *World Socialist Web Site*, thousands of infections have broken out among students and staff in school districts statewide since the first week in August, with one, Iraan-Sheffield Independent School District, closing down for at least two weeks.

In an especially egregious case, central Texas's Williamson County health officials recommended on August 24 that Leander ISD close down for 10 days after over 400 cases—and 3,125 total cumulative “close contacts”—among students and staff were reported. Instead, the district responded that since “at this time we do not believe a districtwide closure meets the needs of our students and families,” it would keep the schools open and would focus on specific classrooms impacted by clusters of positive cases.

Brittany Duhon, a parent of three students and a

member of Families United for Student Safety, called the school district's decision “putting a band-aid on a bullet wound.” The district's toothless “requirement” of masks allows for parents to opt out.

Other central Texas school districts—Austin, Round Rock, Pflugerville, and Hays—have reported positive cases ranging from 46 (Round Rock) to 90 (Pflugerville). For Texas public schools, cumulative positive cases for students and staff are over 8,000 and counting.

On August 25, Boyd ISD in northern Texas closed down for the rest of the week. Trivium Academy in Carrollton, north of Dallas, will be closing from August 27 to September 6. Kemp ISD closed for the remainder of the week. In Burnet County, northwest of Austin, the Marble Falls ISD closed Highland Lakes Elementary School for the remainder of the week after staff members tested positive for the virus.

Two small eastern districts, Bloomburg and Waskom, closed down in early August but have reopened.

Hospitals are filling up, with ICU beds running low or running out. Meanwhile, the state is losing nurses who, stressed and overworked, are leaving the state's hospitals in droves.

Some school districts have done limited pushback on Abbott's policies, either by leaning on local laws or openly defying the governor. In Eanes ISD, the board of trustees “affirmed their commitment to follow laws in effect in our jurisdiction. At this time, the Travis County Order based on Austin Public Health regulations is in effect for all of Eanes ISD,” according to its August 26 news post.

“Those orders require mandating masks inside our facilities,” the statement continues. However, “The Travis County Order does allow for some district administration discretion.” This would allow

exemptions for various activities, such as “outdoor activities, outdoor physical education, band, extracurriculars, for children with special needs, and while eating/drinking. Other than those exceptions, the wearing of masks, per Travis County, must be enforced by our school district.”

Students who refuse to wear masks “will be assigned to a designated location for supervision and learning.” They will be allowed to participate in outdoor activities, but they “may also forfeit their access to transportation.”

However, the statement reaffirms the so-called mitigation strategy: “Both the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) strongly recommend in-person learning and the wearing of masks. This is our best path to sustaining in-person education for all.”

This is a policy that school boards and teachers unions advocate, along with vaccination, in their push to get kids back to in-person learning, which they refer to as the “gold standard,” and their parents back to work producing profits. With the August 23 approval by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) of Pfizer’s mRNA vaccine, these forces tout the vaccine as the latest magic bullet, “a milestone as we continue to battle the COVID-19 pandemic,” in the words of FDA commissioner Dr. Janet Woodcock.

President Joe Biden, who infamously declared “independence” from the pandemic while urging discarding of masks and celebrating in July 4 gatherings, has joined the chorus urging vaccination mandates for businesses and public institutions. However, as the WSWs emphasized on August 26:

In the current formulation by the White House, the CDC and the entire political spectrum, the vaccine-only mandate gives free rein to the virus, which will have the final say on the matter, acting on the basis of well-known epidemiological laws. Whether it is the let-it-rip approach advocated by Republican governors, or the mitigation but not eradication approach of Biden and the Democrats, the virus will be able to expand exponentially, as will hospitalizations and deaths.

Vaccinations will not stop or even mitigate the infections without a massive public health campaign that includes lockdowns, along with vaccinations, social distancing, contact tracing and masks to eradicate the virus. This will require the mobilization of the working class through the formation of rank-and-file committees.



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