

Oklahoma middle school student dies from COVID-19 as Delta variant surges through US schools

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30 August 2021

Clarence “Tre” Johnson III, a 13-year-old eighth grade student at Mary Golda Ross Middle School in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, died on August 19 of COVID-19 complications. He had been hospitalized for six days, five of them on a ventilator, battling pneumonia as well as the virus, before succumbing to the disease.

Clarence’s parents had both tested positive for COVID-19, so the family was prevented from being together during his last days.

Teachers and staff remembered Clarence, who was Comanche and Kiowa, as a “happy boy” with “a beautiful soul and unforgettable smile.” His parents started a GoFundMe fundraiser to defray funeral costs. In a message on the GoFundMe page, his parents said, “He had a strong love of all kinds of music, food, video games, animals & social media, and of course his family & friends. Tre was taken from us way too soon, but he’s home now.”

In an August 26 announcement of Clarence’s death, Oklahoma City Public Schools (OKCPS) stated, “Crisis counseling is available to students and staff. We will keep his family and friends in our thoughts during this very difficult time.” The statement also mentioned the death of a teacher without giving details.

Child hospitalizations have been steadily rising in Oklahoma in line with the surge of the Delta variant fueled by the reopening of schools and businesses. In the first week of August, the Oklahoma State Department of Health (OSDH) reported that 25 Oklahomans under the age of 18 were hospitalized. The next week, that number jumped to at least 60 children.

The OSDH reported that for the general population, including children, there were 3,338 new coronavirus cases on August 27, bringing the seven-day rolling average for that week to 2,577, with 30 deaths. The

OSDH has reported 542,412 total cases and a provisional death count of 9,704 throughout the pandemic. Among the 1,510 currently hospitalized in the state with COVID-19, there are 60 children hospitalized in pediatric beds.

Other states throughout the region report similarly grim figures, which are steadily rising as schools reopen across the US. At the national level, child deaths from COVID-19 have reached record numbers, with 47 children succumbing to the virus in the two weeks from August 13 to 26, according to data from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). Clarence was the third child to die from COVID-19 in Oklahoma and the bipartisan school reopening policy will only lead to further suffering and deaths among children in the state and throughout the US.

In Texas, Republican Governor Greg Abbott has fought might and main to eliminate any statewide health measures, including vaccination and mask mandates. On Sunday, Texas reported 2,857 new confirmed cases and 120 new fatalities, with the seven-day average for deaths second only to Florida. The state’s total number of cases and deaths according to worldometers.info are 3,572,725 and 56,967, respectively. To date, 59 children have died from COVID-19 in Texas, by far the highest figure among all US states.

In response to Abbott’s intransigence, some school districts have defied his orders. Large numbers of absences and protests by worried parents, as well as closures of many schools following outbreaks across the state, belie the reassurances of teachers unions and politicians of both bourgeois parties that in-person classes are safe for kids.

In Louisiana, which has one of the nation’s lowest vaccination rates, hospitals were filled to the brim as

Hurricane Ida made landfall Sunday, sure to make an already dire situation even worse. In the first two weeks of school, through August 22, the Louisiana Department of Health reported 6,954 cases in the state's schools. At least 10 children have died from COVID-19 in the state since the start of the pandemic.

Patrick Sanders, a 14-year-old freshman and football player at Baker High School near Baton Rouge, died August 25 of COVID-19. The entire team was quarantined, and the school has instituted virtual learning until at least September 7. Three other students at the high school have so far tested positive. The state also announced the death from COVID-19 of a child under one year old. Louisiana has seen more than 671,000 COVID-19 cases and at least 12,226 deaths.

Arkansas experienced 2,866 cases on August 27, according to the state's Department of Health, creeping closer to the 60,000 mark for the month. More than a third of new cases were in children 17 and under. Those 10 and under had the largest increase, 599, while 11- to-17-year-olds accounted for 423. New deaths for the day reached 30, making the total for the state 6,836. Since the beginning of August, there have been a total of 6,450 positive cases among staff and students in Arkansas's public schools.

The *Arkansas Traveler* reported on August 29 that in the first four days of classes at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, there were 55 new COVID-19 cases, bringing total active cases to 105. The paper noted, "That is the highest number since January 14, during the third wave of the pandemic, and it is up about 184 percent from Sunday's 37 cases. Among the active cases, 90 are students, seven are faculty and eight are staff members."

New Mexico reported 958 new cases and nine new deaths on August 27, bringing total cases and deaths for the state to 229,509 and 4,505. There were 362 hospitalizations. Within less than a week of reopening several schools have already been closed as a result of outbreaks, despite some of the schools having masking policies, including in Rio Rancho where Randi Weingarten held a press conference on August 5 to promote the deadly lie of "safe school reopenings."

In the aftermath of the shutdowns, the New Mexico Public Education Department is no longer requiring schools to switch to remote learning when one or more student or staff is infected. Kurt Steinhaus, Secretary-Designate of New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED), stated on August 24, "We're going to do everything we possibly can to mitigate the effects of

COVID and get our kids in school and make sure that they're learning."

New Mexico does not track the number of infections in schools, but according to an analysis by the New Mexico Environmental Department, which only tracks responses in the past *two weeks*, 215 schools have had two or more outbreaks and 18 of these had four or more outbreaks, with a few as high as six, despite the universal mask mandate in K-12 schools in the state and its vaccine mandate for school employees.

Under the former rules, 18 schools would be closed down for having mass outbreaks, but now they will continue in-person. The state has simply asked districts to come up with their own plans for how to deal with outbreaks, so it is not clear under what, if any, circumstances schools would have to shut down in the state.

The reason schools are kept open in Republican states as well as in Democratic ones is the same, so that workers' children have somewhere to be babysat while their parents produce profits for the major corporations and Wall Street, regardless of how many children become sick or die.

Teachers, parents, students and workers more broadly must join and build rank-and-file committees, independent of the Democrats, Republicans and unions, in order to enforce the necessary measures to end the pandemic, and to oppose the sabotage of public health measures by both parties in the interests of private profit. To prevent further suffering and death among children and the broader population, schools must immediately switch to remote learning as part of a comprehensive array of policies to eradicate COVID-19, which scientific experts say could be accomplished within months if coordinated systematically.



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