

As Texas COVID-19 cases surge, opposition to unsafe schooling grows

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As the fascistic governor of Texas fights to impose his ban on mask mandates, COVID-19 infections are rampaging through Texas schools, causing school districts to shutter buildings due to widespread illness and staff shortages. There are growing signs of opposition among parents and educators to the life-threatening conditions.

Especially hard-hit over the past few weeks was the Deep Eastern subregion, where at least 24 districts suspended classes due to outbreaks. While the explanation for the overwhelming majority of closures was, in the words of Hughes Springs ISD, an “alarming number” of COVID cases, other reasons cited were updating of the fresh air circulation system (Garrison ISD), deep cleaning (North Hopkins ISD, Frankston ISD), a high number of student absences (Zavalla ISD) and staffing shortages (Livingston ISD, Leverett’s Chapel ISD).

Many schools in North Texas were also hit by outbreaks last week. Princeton ISD in the northeast reported 141 cases out of 6,000 students on Sept. 1, with one elementary school suffering an outbreak that involved 50 students. On the same day, Fort Worth reported 900 cases, while Dallas ISD had a total of 1,200. Trivium Academy, a charter school in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, closed down until Sept. 6. At Connally Junior High School in Mott, near Waco, two teachers lost their lives to the pandemic just a few days apart.

Public health officials in Austin announced on August 31 that the first pediatric death in Travis County occurred last weekend. Dr. Elizabeth Knapp, an Austin Regional Clinic pediatrician, told reporters that because of the Delta variant, COVID “is affecting all people in our community who are at risk for getting coronavirus, including our young children. We’ve had lots of infants who have been infected, as well as toddlers and school-aged children.”

The number of young adults infected continues to climb. Breanna Gray, a student at Navarro College in Freestone County, succumbed to COVID-19 on August

19. She was described by her grieving mother as having “[n]o underlying health conditions whatsoever. Nothing. Healthy.” The family had opted not to get vaccinated. “Our house is so quiet now,” lamented her mother. “It’s not a game. COVID is not a game.”

Although some education officials show varying degrees of concern, they embrace the mitigation model and, when they call school closures—sometimes the second time around—remain committed to getting students back into the classroom as soon as possible, despite the fact that it is clearly unsafe. For example, Wells Superintendent Jill Gaston said on the Wells ISD Facebook page, “It is with a heavy heart that I announce an extension to our closure. We had truly hoped that 5 days away would clear up any ‘normal’ back-to-school illnesses, but it has not.”

After Mike Morath, head of the Texas Education Agency, described the “very disruptive situation” in the schools on Sept. 1 to members of the department of education, Venus ISD Superintendent James Hopper responded, “Last thing we ever want to do is cease instruction. Last thing we ever want to do is close schools. There is no post-COVID world at this point, and so what we have to do is simply deal with that, and so we are going to have absences.” Hopper went on to claim implausibly, “None of us wanted to be in this situation today. I think none of us thought we would be in this situation on or about July 1.”

Hopper then pointed to what he claimed was the problem: “The problem that all schools are having now is that no one has enough substitute teachers. No one has enough bus drivers. No one has enough custodians.” He also said that when schools reopen, “Some people prefer to mask, and some people do not. And so, we want to maintain that flexibility as long as we can.” ICUs are filling up, massive numbers of students are getting infected, and some have died, but “we” need “flexibility.”

Parents, teachers and students are not taking such a cavalier attitude to the ongoing and growing crisis. Their dissatisfaction with the course taken by politicians, unions and school officials has taken various forms, both passive and active.

On August 23, Dallas ISD officials admitted that about 12,000 students did not show up for school the first week. The schools carried out a phone drive to call parents and cajole them back into the classroom. One school principal said, “We’re really connecting with them in our conversations, letting them know we miss the student, we want to see them here and that we’re going to take care of them as much as we can.” Within a week of luring reluctant students and their parents to accept in-person classes, the outbreaks made closures necessary.

At some schools and district offices, parents have held protests. In the Carroll ISD in the Dallas-Fort Worth area parents protested outside the administration building to demand a mask mandate. They presented a petition signed by more than 100 Southland doctors and 850 residents. A physician at the protest, Jennifer Shutter, who carried a sign saying, “I’m tired of seeing people suffer and die,” told reporters that most doctors who signed the petition could not attend the protest because they are “taking care of critically ill patients in the ICU.”

About 150 parents and others held a rally at the Frisco ISD administration building to revive COVID-19 protocols that were scrapped for the 2021-22 school year. Dr. Vikas Jain, a physician and a parent to children in the Frisco Independent School District, said, “We want ventilation, Merv-13 filters, and at lunch we want to see that kids are spread out.” Other parents called for virtual learning for all grades.

Pro-vaccination and pro-mask protests at other school districts have taken place: Fort Bend, Allen, Round Rock and others.

Parents expressed their suspicions of official reassurances in a survey conducted by Edge Research for the National Parent Teacher Association and released on Sept. 1. It found that the percentage of parents in favor of returning to full-time in-class instruction had dropped from 58 percent on July 27 to 43 percent by the time the survey was taken. July 27 was the date that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention backtracked on its previous irresponsible loosening of its COVID-19 guidance. That, and the outbreaks that have taken place since then, appears to have planted a healthy skepticism in families’ minds.

Despite the difficulties of online learning last school

year, parents are distrustful of the reopening. One mother told the surveyors: “You want them back in the building, but at the same time, you want them safe. You want them healthy. You want them home so if staying home is the best way, then I think we need to stay at home.” The report on the survey broke down the results for Afro American and Latino parents, 41 and 37 percent respectively, but did not mention what white parents thought. Neither did it give a breakdown by class.

Extremely limited and half-heartedly implemented “mitigation” measures—vaccinations, masking and social distancing—are showing themselves to be an insufficient response to the Delta variant. Far from bringing the pandemic under control, they will lead to the emergence of new strains of COVID-19, as they do not prevent the virus from circulating in the population and mutating. These measures, as opposed to a policy of eradication that would require widespread lockdowns, are being pursued because getting children back into classrooms is necessary in order for parents to work to produce profits for employers. The well-being of children has nothing to do with why schools continue to reopen.

COVID-19, which is a preventable scourge, can be brought under control through an eradication campaign that includes universal masking, social distancing, vaccine mandates, lockdowns, contact tracing, full pay and benefits for workers, support for families coping with isolation, and international cooperation. But the ruling layers of society will not implement such a policy because it endangers their feverish pursuit of profit. It is up to the working class to carry forward this fight. Join the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to become a part of the struggle to defend the lives of children and educators.



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