

Governor rejects remote learning

Tennessee schools open only to close again after surge of COVID-19 cases

Warren Duzak
3 September 2021

The new school year had barely begun in Tennessee before school districts had to begin closing schools because of COVID-19 outbreaks.

Less than a month into the new school year a total of 12 school districts were reported to have closed on September 1 and would remain closed until September 7. One school district announced a closing until September 13.

“Staffing shortages and hundreds of confirmed cases among students are driving these choices,” The *Tennessean* newspaper reported.

The seven-day average of daily cases for adults and children in Tennessee by August 27 was 6,089 or 42,623 a week, and a total of almost 24,800 children tested positive for COVID during the same week. That represented 53 percent of all new cases. Their ages: 5 to 18.

The conclusion is clear: As the Delta variant of the coronavirus rages across the United States, more and more children are COVID’s victims. Tragically, some will have seen their last summer.

There have been at least 177 cases of multi-system inflammatory syndrome (MIS-C) in Tennessee children, a COVID-19 related disorder with life-threatening consequences.

While many, if not most, children who become infected with COVID-19 can fight it off, “in children who go on to develop MIS-C, some organs and tissues — such as the heart, lungs, blood vessels, kidneys, digestive system, brain, skin or eyes — become severely inflamed,” mayoclinic.org reported.

Hospitals, including children’s hospitals, are at or near capacity. More than one in four children currently hospitalized with COVID-19 are in an ICU.

Although whole school districts are reported to be closed, in fact many if not all districts are only closing some schools. In an effort to avoid Governor Bill Lee’s prohibition on whole systems going to remote learning, individual schools are being closed a few days at a time and

remote learning used. Schools are using lost days set aside for heavy snows and other inclement weather in a thinly veiled effort to evade a state law passed in April allowing Lee to override state and local health departments and school boards if they attempt to close schools during the pandemic.

“The law effectively circumvents the power of health departments to close schools, while also granting school boards and charter schools’ governing boards the power to keep schools open, regardless of the health risks,” the WSWS reported at the time.

From the very beginning of the pandemic, Governor Lee was, as the old saying goes, “worse than useless.”

Lee, an outspoken supporter of Donald Trump, made a point of minimizing the dangers of the virus. Refusing to take the necessary step of a lock down, Lee made the pandemic and public health measures an issue of individual freedom and “personal responsibility.” He also suggested that Tennesseans find “solace in prayer.” The multi-millionaire Lee, who lives on a 1,000-acre cattle and horse farm, has described himself as a devout Christian.

When personal protective equipment like gloves, surgical gowns and high quality masks and face protection were in short supply, his administration’s Tennessee Department of Health suggested to medical workers to substitute large garbage bags for surgical gowns, small plastic grocery bags for gloves and swim goggles for face protection. Lee also contracted with a sock manufacturer to make ineffective porous facemasks from sock material. The material had been impregnated with an antimicrobial pesticide for use as socks, but the material had been repurposed for Tennessee residents to wear over their nose and mouth, with unknown results.

When both the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that teachers, students, and staff wear masks regardless of vaccination status, Lee continued his anti-scientific mantra that denies teachers, students and staff the right to be safe in school.

“While local decision-making is important, individual decision-making by a parent on issues regarding the health and well being of their child is the most important,” Governor Lee told the media. “Districts will make the decision they believe are [sic] best for their schools, but parents will have the ultimate decision-making for their individual child’s health and well-being.”

He made no mention of the health and safety of the vast majority of teachers, staff, students and their parents.

Tennessee Education Commissioner Penny Schwinn told USA Today Network reporters that there were no plans to allow whole districts to shut down. “I think you’ve heard both from the governor and I that district wide is in-person. We want to make sure we are treating this with a scalpel and not a sledgehammer.”

What a misleading, ill-chosen if not patently stupid metaphor.

COVID-19 is not some localized tumor that can be cut out. It is a disease that has infected the entire populated world. It can only be beaten by shutting off its air by preventing transmission to new bodies. That requires a lockdown including the schools, especially the schools, until children can be vaccinated and the virus brought under control.

Taking 35 to 40 million children and forcing them back into crowded, poorly ventilated buildings, unmasked and not vaccinated for several hours daily, before sending them back into their communities, homes and families is criminal.

For those in Tennessee and the U.S. who want to know what to expect, all they must do is look to England. There are no mask requirements and no efforts to mitigate crowding unprotected children into classrooms.

“The UK’s current rate of 3,420 cases per million people is higher than those of the United States, Japan, Russia, Turkey, Thailand, France and Iran,” the WSWS reported just a few days ago.

One can hear the echoes of Bill Lee’s mindless “personal responsibility” theme in the UK as well.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said in a British newspaper column that the return of millions of children and educators to schools was a “happy position” to be in, noting—no doubt cheerfully—“Parents too have a responsibility to make sure that their children are tested regularly.”

Among the reactions to such nonsense was a short video posted by a parent with three children, Lisa Diaz. Lisa has posted a number of videos in recent days focusing on the unsafe return to schools that have received a large viewership.

“In England, the UK’s most populous country, the virus is spreading out of control. Sunday’s *Observer* newspaper reported figures from the Office for National Statistics that

estimated that in the week ending August 20, 756,900 people in England—one person in 70—were infected with Covid-19,” the WSWS reported.

One must ask, then, why with such damning evidence both here and abroad the two largest US teachers’ unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), as well as President Joe Biden and the Democratic Party support the reopening of schools.

To fight back against the homicidal school reopening policies of Lee, a Republican, and the other Democratic and Republican governors requires a new organization that represents the interests of teachers, students and parents. The Tennessee Rank-and-File Safety Committee is that organization.

The Tennessee Rank and File Committee said in its most recent statement:

“Governor Lee and Tennessee’s homicidal Republican majority in the legislature have blocked districts from closing schools and offering virtual instruction in order to protect the lives of students and educators. Now, schools across the state are closing because staff and students are sick.

“For this reason, we ask all Tennessee educators, parents and students who agree with our demands to help us build the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and to attend our next online meeting on Sunday at 4pm central time. Sign up to attend at WSWS.ORG/EDSAFETY!”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact