

Maskless Tennessee governor hands out free shoes as children face growing COVID-19 infections

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As Tennessee parents, teachers and school staff demand protection against the spread of COVID-19, including mask requirements in schools, Republican Tennessee Governor Bill Lee is striking a Christ pose by handing out free shoes in one of the poorest counties in the state as part of the effort to force children to return to unsafe schools.

Lee and his wife, Maria—both unmasked and sporting folksy grins—appeared at a Perry County elementary school as their public relations photographers snapped photos of the pair measuring the bare feet of one young girl. In another Facebook page post, Lee, again with no mask, sits on a gymnasium floor surrounded by smiling, unmasked children.

He told reporters Thursday he thought the stunt was fine because he had been vaccinated for COVID-19. Children under 12 remain ineligible for vaccination.

The event was sponsored by Samaritan's Feet, a religious non-profit that states on its website to believe in "foot washing" and giving shoes that serve to inspire "hope in children by providing shoes as the foundation to a spiritual and healthy life."

Lee and his wife were involved in taking off children's shoes and socks and actually washing their feet. As touching as that may seem, subjecting children to religious rituals in public schools is wildly inappropriate.

Through the charitable deed of washing the feet of unvaccinated children, Lee hopes to wash his hands of any responsibility for the growing number of infections among students, teachers, staff and their families.

A multimillionaire who lives on a 1,000-acre cattle and horse farm in the richest county in the state, Lee gives new, disgusting meaning to the concept of

noblesse oblige. It was apparently lost on the governor and his entourage what it means in 2021 in the richest country in the world to have to provide shoes for children forced to return to school under the deadly threat of an uncontrollable virus.

A Facebook post by the governor's office drew quick responses, with many taking Lee to task for his cynical posturing.

"We'd love it if you would 'partner' with our local school districts and empower them to make decisions to keep our kids safe," Poliala Mahoney Dickson wrote. "Like being able to allow for virtual learning when large portions of their students are out sick or quarantined. That would be super!!!!!"

"The Delta variant sends its thanks to you for creating perfect conditions for its spread," David Haskell said in his post. "Perhaps the massive infection rate in TN will yield the next variant? We could name it for you—a fitting acknowledgment of your unwavering commitment to making Tennesseans suffer and die."

Brenda Butka was brief and to the point: "another super-spreader event for the cameras."

"Helping spread the virus to children by your bad example. Pro life party MY ASS," John Neff wrote.

"What is WRONG with you and your wife?" Terri Sterling Donovan asked. "You are vaccinated but these children are not. You are an immoral person."

As of September 7, there have been more than 1.1 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Tennessee and 13,422 new cases reported on that date, with 13,879 deaths so far and a 7-day average of 46 deaths per day.

Perry County has had 1,382 confirmed cases and 31 deaths, placing it sixth for the highest per capita death

toll in the state. Less than one-third of residents are fully vaccinated.

It should be noted that with a little over 8,000 county residents, Perry likely still has the lowest population density of any county in the state, about one person for every 19 square miles (about 50 sq. km.). It has a median annual income of barely \$32,000, and slightly more than one in five county residents live in poverty.

Located in southwest Middle Tennessee, the county has a history of economic distress. During the Great Recession of 2008-2009 the county's unemployment rate peaked at 27 percent, the highest in the state and among the highest in the country. The surge in unemployment followed the 2009 closure of the Fisher & Company auto parts plant in the city of Linden, which resulted in hundreds of workers losing their jobs.

Despite misinformation concerning children and COVID-19 promoted by President Joe Biden on down, school age children and younger can be victims of the virus, often with debilitating results and death. Just this week alone a quarter of a million children across the US contracted the virus, a record for the pandemic as more schools reopen. Children amounted to almost 27 percent of the new cases nationwide. About 2,400 have been hospitalized, according to the *Washington Post*.

Tennessee State Department Health Commissioner Lisa Piercey reported in mid-August that children made up 36 percent of the state's reported cases, and hundreds of students across the state in more than a dozen school districts have been forced to quarantine or isolate in this latest surge of the more infectious Delta variant. At least seven children under the age of 10 in the state have died from COVID-19 since March 2020.

"We had 14,000 pediatric cases in the last seven days, which is a 57 percent increase over the week prior," Piercey told reporters.

A large portion of active COVID-19 cases in Memphis/Shelby County, 32 percent, are people 17 and younger, according to the Shelby County Health Department. It has the largest school district in the state, with 110,500 students, and is the 25th largest school district in the United States.

To date some parents have looked to the courts for help. A lawsuit from parents of two children in Shelby County was upheld when a federal judge ruled that lifting the mask mandate for all students made it impossible for some children to safely attend school.

Lee had issued an executive order allowing parents to opt out of having their children wear masks in school districts that mandate them.

"Plaintiffs have identified ways that they have been excluded from participating in school programs and activities, including from physical education classes, and socializing with their peers when within the school buildings and at lunch," U.S. District Judge Sheryl H. Lipman wrote in the ruling.

"The Governor has put the parents of medically vulnerable students in the position of having to decide whether to keep their children at home where they will likely suffer continued learning loss or risk placing them in an environment that presents a serious risk to their health and safety," the lawsuit states.

A similar lawsuit in Knox County, the third largest school district in the state and home to Knoxville, was not considered for technical reasons and failing to file proper documents. The lawsuit is expected to be re-filed.

A court victory in favor of mask mandates, in the final analysis, would represent only a tactical success for the implementation of a limited and inadequate mitigation measure.

Parents and students must demand a strategy aimed at eliminating the virus. Unvaccinated and often unmasked elementary and middle school children cannot be sent back into poorly ventilated, overcrowded classrooms. Mitigation is not the answer. The fight against the pandemic cannot be left to the likes of Lee or his Democratic Party counterparts. The working class in Tennessee, the United States and the world must build rank-and-file committees to demand that schools be closed until the virus is stamped out and schools are fit places of learning.

We call on all those who agree with this strategy to join the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Committee when it meets online this Sunday, September 12, at 4:00 p.m. Eastern. [Click here to register.](#)



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