

As Texas ICU beds fill to capacity, parents' anger mounts

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As the COVID-19 Delta variant continues to rage through Texas, the availability of staffed intensive care unit (ICU) beds has shrunk to alarming—and in some cases, nonexistent—levels. On September 9, Texas once again led the nation with 25,293 new cases and 398 new deaths, placing severe demands on health care facilities and personnel. On a weekly basis, upwards of 25,000 public school children are coming down with coronavirus.

The 11-county region of the state that includes the capital Austin ran out of staffed ICU beds on September 6, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) data. In this area of 2.3 million residents, 245 adult and 14 pediatric patients were being treated for COVID-19.

Health officials in Denton County, north of the Dallas-Fort Worth region, with a population of over 887,000, reported that there were no ICU beds available on September 8. The 14-day average of hospitalizations is 197, with the last four days showing 200 or more COVID admissions. Tarrant County, Texas's third most populous, reported over 1,000 hospitalizations for the seventh straight day, averaging 1,130. Fully 25 percent of total hospital bed capacity is occupied by COVID-19 patients.

Similar statistics are reported throughout the state, with some regions reaching or surpassing hospitalization figures not seen since January. Last week, for example, Austin-Travis County suffered 36 deaths, the highest weekly death count in more than a year.

Austin-Travis County Medical Director Dr. Desmar Walkes told KVUE that, with ICU units filling up, there is nowhere else that patients can be sent because all the other hospitals are confronted with the same situation. "They'll be moved to nontraditional care

areas like the recovery rooms for surgery areas and cath labs, where normally cardiac cuts occur," Dr. Walkes said.

He also noted the staff shortage that hospitals face as nurses and other health care workers face a plethora of stressful challenges: overwork, hostility of patients and their relatives, the risk of getting infected themselves, the constant sight of what should have been preventable sickness and death. As one Austin nurse, Selena Xie, told the station, "It's just really emotionally, mentally and physically exhausting." Xie also mentioned "compassion fatigue," especially when treating patients who chose not to get vaccinated.

Texas Republican Governor Greg Abbott is simultaneously doubling down on his ban on mask mandates, with he and State Attorney General Ken Paxton vowing to retaliate against any school district that defies the ban. Abbott has based his battle against mandates on his supposed opposition to "violating parental rights." Meanwhile, the parents whose "rights" Abbott claims to be protecting are growing angrier as they see teachers, bus drivers and their children falling victim to COVID infection.

A group of parents in the Allen Independent School District in the Dallas area filed a federal class action lawsuit on September 1 to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Texas. The court complaint says: "The School Board has a duty to assure the right to life of the DOES's and all students for that matter, is effectuated in School Board Policies, Procedures and Directives but currently it is not. In fact, it gives more import to the happiness of some students over the life, health and welfare of many others."

The Allen ISD, while avoiding specifics, stated its disagreement with the claim that students' constitutional rights were being violated by making

mask use optional. The statement further asserted, “Allen ISD continues to work proactively and professionally with parents who have questions or concerns about COVID-related issues. The vast majority of these concerns have been resolved without the need for litigation.”

On the contrary, the parents complained that the Allen ISD has refused to take up the issue at school board meetings. One parent told NBC 5 Dallas-Ft. Worth, “They shut us down when people try to talk in the board meetings. [Parents] are just getting messages back saying well ‘we know you have other options. You can leave Allen ISD if you want.’ That’s what parents are getting, and these are our schools.” She added, “They aren’t doing tracing. They aren’t really distancing.”

Another parent, a vaccinated nurse and mother of two who, along with her kids, caught COVID-19 three weeks into the school year, put it succinctly: “Honestly, I feel like when I’m sending them [to school] we’re playing Russian roulette with their lives and other kids’ lives.”

The parents’ demands for vaccination and mask mandates are justified. But these measures are not enough to put an end to the scourge of COVID-19 or to protect the lives of children. They are palliative efforts and part of the Democrats’ and trade unions’ “mitigation” strategy, the aim of which is to slow down the spread of Delta variant but not halt it or the suffering and death it causes. The Democrats, with the support of the trade unions, advocate for mitigation because they see it as the most effective means to keep workers in the workplace so that profits can continue to be produced. Children have to be forced into schools in order to make this happen.

The argument is made that a full shutdown of schools and nonessential businesses is impossible because there is, in essence, no money to finance such an action. This is false. There is plenty of wealth to fund the closure of schools, full wages for parents to look after homebound children, high-quality online education, and social services necessary to help families cope with the psychological strains of shuttered schools. The problem is that all of this wealth is in the hands of the super-rich. Houston, Texas alone is the home to 17 billionaires.

Families and educators cannot accept just the

“mitigation” of COVID-19. They must demand its eradication. This requires measures that go beyond vaccination, distancing and masks to lockdowns, contact tracing, shutting of nonessential businesses, full support for laid-off workers, massive investments in education and child welfare and international coordination. This will not be implemented by appeals to any section of the ruling class but through massive, unified action by the working class. Join the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to be a part of this struggle.



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