

COVID-19 outbreaks and staff resignations deepen crisis in Southwest US schools

D. Lencho

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With the reopening of schools across the United States, there has been an explosion of outbreaks of COVID-19, and the Southwest is no exception. Rather than implement shutdowns and remote learning, school districts are plowing ahead with either homicidal “herd immunity” policies or so-called mitigation measures. Meanwhile, teachers and staff have quit in droves amid a disturbing trend of concealing needed information on COVID-19 from the public.

In **Arizona**, only 30 percent of the state’s 215 school districts provide COVID-19 dashboards, and just one county health department out of 15 in the state, Pima County, publicly monitors active COVID-19 cases by district. There is no comprehensive and transparent picture of where the virus is being contracted.

A ban on mask mandates inserted into the Arizona state budget by the Republican-majority state legislature with the approval of the state’s Republican governor, Doug Ducey, has been challenged in court. A recent poll shows 57 percent opposition to it among Arizona residents. Ducey has said that there is no need to revisit the issue and it is scheduled to take effect September 29.

Ducey plans to bribe schools to obey the ban by granting them funding that will be denied to school districts that do not comply. Tucson Unified School District, which has a mask mandate and whose infection rate has been about half of that of another non-mandated district in Pima County, plans to defy the ban, though most other districts are likely to cave.

As in the rest of the US, Arizona has lost teachers and staff to infections, deaths and resignations, causing a scramble to fill vacancies. The Cartwright District in Phoenix raised the daily pay rate for subs to \$200, almost twice the statewide average, and another district now offers a \$3,100 bonus for those who work a certain number of hours. No experience or education outside of a high school diploma is required. Districts are having to revise or cancel bus routes due to the shortage of drivers.

Nevada, with a Democratic governor and legislature, is pursuing a mitigation approach which is entirely unable to prevent infections. Following the early August reopening of schools, some were forced to resume distance learning due to COVID-19 outbreaks, only to resume in-person instruction by

the end of the month. Predictably, cases grew, and on September 21, state agency Nevada Health Response issued a statement calling for mask mandates in all counties from September 24-30. This will do little to stop or slow the spread of infections.

Meanwhile, bus service has been spotty or nonexistent for various districts. Clark County School District, which covers Las Vegas, is short about 240 drivers, and sometimes students must wait hours for their bus. Top pay is \$19.98 an hour and drivers work split shifts, sometimes as few as 30 hours a week. With the district facing a shortage of staff and teachers, substitute teachers are offered a \$1,000 stipend for working 15 days per quarter. Washoe County, which includes Reno, offers a \$10 a day bonus for subs teaching in the midst of the pandemic.

Utah instituted a law for the 2021-22 school year forbidding schools from changing to virtual learning in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak without the approval of Governor Spencer Cox, the President of the State Senate, the State Speaker of the House, all Republicans, as well as the State Superintendent of Education. The legislature also banned schools from imposing mask mandates, with the governor claiming, “masks are not as effective as most of the pro-mask crowd are arguing.”

Yet another law, called “Test to Stay,” requires schools with 1,500 students or more to test all students for COVID-19 only when two percent of the student body tests positive for COVID-19 within the last 14 days. For those with fewer than 1,500 students, 30 students must test positive for COVID-19 within the last 14 days to trigger the testing of the entire student body. By September 17, over 650 students had tested positive, nearly half of whom were between five and 10 years of age. After one month of school, the number of COVID-19-positive students, teachers and others at schools was 6,200.

New Mexico has more than 1,000 openings for public school teachers for 2021-22. School districts are trying to lure teachers, substitutes, educational assistants, bus drivers and other staff with various incentives. Santa Fe Public Schools has held two job fairs recently, and New Mexico school districts are using federal pandemic dollars to attract teaching assistants, who currently earn around \$25,000 a year, into teaching.

On September 15, Democratic Governor Michelle Lujan

Grisham again extended, this time until October 15, the indoor mask mandate that her office had put into effect August 20 after 109 schools in the state reported COVID-19 cases following the statewide reopenings. The order also requires all school workers in public, private or charter schools who are not fully vaccinated or who are unwilling to provide proof of vaccination to their respective supervisors or provide proof of a COVID-19 test on a weekly basis.

Across **Texas**, school districts have experienced shortages of teachers as the danger of COVID-19 in the schools receives a minimal response due to the “herd immunity” policies of the state’s governor and legislature. Houston Independent School District, the largest in the state, reported 700 unfilled teacher slots at the start of the year, more than seven times higher than its average of less than 100 vacancies in previous years.

As the number of COVID-19 cases at Texas schools continues to grow—52,000 among students and over 13,000 among staff since the school year began—teachers have experienced burnout, stress, overwork and fear from the reckless policy of keeping schools operating at all costs. And, as in other states, accurate and up-to-date information is getting harder to find.

These concerns are shown on Facebook and other social media platforms.

A Fort Worth teacher recently complained, “There are kids missing in my class every day. I don’t know if they’re quarantining or if they’re sick. I could have kids that are supposed to be in quarantine but aren’t. I have no idea. There is no testing, no reporting, no transparency, no support. I’m retiring after this year. I’ve made sacrifices for the last eighteen months and I’m done. [This] shit is taking years off my life. There’s been nothing normal about any of this.”

Another teacher from Irving Independent School District posted, “I did not think things could be worse than last year. But they [the administration] are clearly covering up how bad things are. They aren’t going to get better. We’re just expected to take it. I don’t know how much longer I can do this.”

Others have resigned, unwilling to endure the thankless grind, with one posting, “I resigned today and cited COVID and my anxiety about that as well as wanting to home school my son. I’m not sure if SBEC [State Board for Educator Certification] will suspend my certification, but it would be nice to find a remote position. I used to love my job so much and still love teaching. I’m sad, but everything is too overwhelming now. Life is too short to be unhappy and consumed by stress.”

Another responded, “Resigned at the end of the summer to take care of my mother. Educators do so much, and beyond, that we put ourselves last. This past year taught me that the State & the district could care less. We need to put ourselves and our families first. You’re doing the right thing.”

One teacher expressed her anger and frustration with the harassment and pressure she faces at her school, saying, “So, someone who has decades in education, my 5th year as SPED

[special education], COVID shutting down schools, wreaking havoc... why am I getting such horrible (and numerous) evaluations? I’m not teacher of the year... but I know I don’t deserve what I’m getting. I’ve been so happy... til now. There’s a freakin’ shortage of teachers, they want to drive away the ones who are risking their lives, putting up with the reading academy BS, etc.?”

The teacher asked, “Kick me while I’m down, won’t ya? Why do they keep making this so hard? I honestly don’t have a clue how to handle how I feel.”

The stonewalling and lack of transparency of districts regarding student cases prompted another teacher to ask, “What are some of the protocols your districts have in place? No testing, no masks, no communication with teachers or students about possible exposure or even if a child has tested positive in your room. Had eight out, now only have two out positive. Only found out because I asked the nurse.”

A colleague replied, “Yes, I was disgusted when I got a call from my niece’s school asking why she wasn’t in school. I told them that in the last few days 5 of the family members had tested positive... I was told she needed to be in school. I repeated it all again assuming she hadn’t heard me and [went] on to say she can’t taste so she likely has it. She told me again bring her to school or she’s truant. She’s 6, she can’t be vaccinated and hearing that woman tell me to take her in left me disgusted. I didn’t take her in. She came back positive later that day.”

The anger of teachers must find expression in the formation of rank-and-file committees in opposition to the dangerous policies of both big-business parties. There is growing opposition to the homicidal school reopenings internationally, which has found powerful expression in the school strike set to take place in the UK and other countries this Friday, October 1. All those who wish to organize similar strikes and protests should sign up today to join and build a rank-and-file committee in your district or state.



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