

“We need to do whatever it takes to get rid of COVID-19”

Former Los Angeles teacher speaks out on conditions in schools and fight to eliminate COVID-19

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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Juanita Garcia, a former teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and grandmother who has adopted four of her grandchildren: Samantha, 25; Chevy, 20; Felix, 18; and Caprice, 15. She advocates for immigrant children and their families in her neighborhood within San Fernando Valley, a working-class area served by LAUSD.

The San Fernando Valley has a significant population below the poverty level. According to the US Census Bureau data from 2020, the San Fernando Valley, as well as the city of San Fernando, have the second- and third-highest poverty levels in the Los Angeles Metro area, with over 14 percent of the population in poverty. Additionally, 19 percent of children under 12 experience poverty. Cost of living in the area is 45 percent higher than the national average, with housing being 110 percent higher than the national average. Due to the high cost of living in the area, the average person is more likely to be living in poverty than the average American.

San Fernando Valley is also the center of some of Hollywood’s major studios, including Warner Brothers, Universal Studios and DreamWorks Animation. In 2020, Warner Brothers took in over \$30 billion in revenue, underscoring the massive level of inequality in the area.

Levels of homelessness are also significantly high in the area. Of the 66,000 estimated homeless population in Los Angeles County, 9,000 reside in San Fernando Valley. The preexisting high levels of poverty, homelessness and cost of living have all been exacerbated due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Juanita described how she and her family have been impacted by COVID-19. “I lost my sister to COVID. She was sent to the UCLA Medical Center, the best hospital in LA. She had all the symptoms and was intubated. She was only 46 years old when she passed away in March 2020.

“Personally, I suffered from COVID last December. I was in the hospital for two weeks. Even after being vaccinated, I got COVID. I was very, very tired. I’m 70 years old and used to be very energetic at home and at school. But my energy level really dropped. I had body pains, especially in my chest. Then I had to fight with Medicare because they said it was all in my mind. I’m exhausted all the time, and that worries me. My mouth feels horrible, and I haven’t been able to taste anything for some time.”

With one grandchild still enrolled in LAUSD, Juanita also spoke out regarding the lack of support for her grandchild, as well as many other students and families in the district. She noted that the pandemic has compounded the issues facing students and educators.

Juanita stated, “There’s discrimination, big time. Children and families in the Valley are mostly poor and immigrant, while other parts of the district are better off, and they get treated differently. Both Felix and Caprice are special-ed kids. The anxiety attacks even happened in pre-K. They identified Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) behaviors and a lot of emotional needs. Their mother had bad habits with drugs.

“Felix graduated in May from high school. His anxieties manifested in severe pains in his stomach. The doctor checked him and thought it had something to do with his appendix, but that wasn’t it. He would feel bad in the classroom with the other kids. He was afraid to stay next to them.

“Caprice suffers the most severe anxiety attacks. I had to call for an emergency IEP [Individualized Educational Program] meeting. He cannot go outside to play. He gets so anxious that he cannot breathe. He’ll cry and start shaking. One time he was so nervous that he had an accident. They let the kids at school go without masks. No wonder he’s scared. When I called the school, they were very nasty to me.

“This past August the district was pushing for in-person instruction. Because of Caprice’s condition, I applied for the online instruction program, the City of Angels, which is a very poor program. There were no classes available. The person told me that there were already 16,000 kids in the program, that they weren’t prepared to handle that many, and that Caprice would be on the waiting list.”

Herself a former veteran teacher in LAUSD, Juanita also described how multiple injuries on the job and lack of support from the district and her union forced her to leave the district in 2008. She stated, “Back in 1982, I started working as an assistant in a classroom for LAUSD. I started teaching in 1986 in early childhood. Then in 2008 I got my teaching credential from Cal State University Northridge. That same year, after 26 years of teaching in LAUSD, there were two accidents that happened on the job when I got severely injured. You must understand that when you’re working with these preschool kids, they really love their teachers and follow them around, talking and hugging.

“In the first accident a child was riding one of those metal tricycles at full speed and crashed. I stood up to help and tripped over the roots of a tree. I had to have surgery on my knee. In the second accident, one little girl was running to hug me and then another child ran into me with a tricycle, which resulted in me falling and landing on my right shoulder. It was dislocated, which required several surgeries. In the beginning I couldn’t move it. It took a long time before I regained motion.

“In both cases, I had to fight the district for compensation, and the union didn’t really help. I was very active in the UTLA as a local member rep for Early Childhood, chairperson of committees. I was a rep on the CTA state council and at the state and national NEA levels. Well, my story ended with those accidents, and the UTLA never did anything for me. I’ve been suffering all these years, and I lost everything.

“After that bitter experience 13 years ago, I decided I had to move on with my life. As a grandparent and parent, I advocate for my kids and all the children and families here in the San Fernando Valley. They’re English language learners. Ninety percent of the families here are from Latin America, and many are poor. Once in a while you’ll get a good principal who will work with the parents. I am on ELAC [English Learners Advisory Committee] and School Site Council in my kids’ schools.

“But these families have been hit bad. They don’t have insurance or legal papers. You can’t imagine how badly they’ve been treated. They’ve been hit hard, and yet they’re also working, usually husband and wife, at factory jobs for low pay. Most are immigrants. They don’t have enough food, diapers; they need help with translation, need help with

getting rides to various places. I used to volunteer delivering food to The Lighthouse, which helps pregnant and runaway students.

“I don’t like the way the district treats the parents and kids. They have lots of specialists, lots of employees, and they have the money. The Board of Ed approved a huge budget of \$13 billion for this school year! That was 62 percent more than the previous year. Why are they neglecting the students? They’re supposed to foresee what kinds of problems will come up. I want to know what they are doing with all that money.

“LAUSD is sitting on billions of dollars that they got from the federal and state COVID programs. Billions of dollars. With all that money, why couldn’t they have used all the months we were online to get everything set up properly? They just want the kids to come to school. Money is the reason. Forget about the safety of the children and families and the teachers.”

After watching the recent webinar hosted by the *World Socialist Website*, “How to end the pandemic,” Juanita expressed her support for the strategy of global elimination presented at the meeting.

“I was very impressed with the webinar. Why is the US government acting like this? I believe in vaccinations. One of my grandchildren doesn’t believe in medicine. There are a lot of people like that who are refusing to accept the science and get the vaccines. Didn’t they get their polio, measles, smallpox shots so that they could put their kids in school? Why is this shot different?

“We need to do whatever it takes to get rid of COVID-19. It’s not just for my convenience but for all people. I liked what Dr. Jimenez said about the aerosolization. He’s absolutely right. You breathe it in. We need to create consciousness of this science and how this virus spreads.

“I really liked Lisa Diaz, the lady from the UK. She is very passionate about this.

“I also liked Dr. Baker’s presentation. It was very serious and showed how elimination methods worked in New Zealand. But science has become a political weapon in the wrong hands.

“The only way to fight this is that *everybody* has to follow the rules. It has to be all over the world. Now you have anti-mask demonstrations. There’s a lot of confusion.”



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