

Major staffing shortages at schools throughout the US due to COVID-19 pandemic

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As winter approaches, the COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating in the US and schools coast to coast are experiencing major staffing shortages. As a result of widespread infections and a mass exodus of teachers from the profession, roughly 40 percent of all district leaders and principals describe their current staff shortages as “severe” or “very severe,” according to a survey by EdWeek Research Center conducted last month.

The entire fall semester has been utterly chaotic for educators, coinciding with the Delta surge of the pandemic that has killed over 150,000 Americans. The latest data from the American Association of Pediatrics released Monday showed another 122,000 official infections among children, an increase of 22 percent from two weeks ago. The AAP report indicates 11 additional deaths last week, bringing the cumulative number of child deaths to 625.

The situation is most dire across the Midwest and Northwest, as well as some states in the West. One of the worst affected states is Michigan, where schools were once again the number one source of COVID-19 outbreaks last week. Overall cases in the state are quickly approaching record highs, with the number of active cases now exceeding all previous points in the pandemic at over 319,000. This number is over 25,000 more than the nearly 294,000 active cases at the last peak on April 25.

According to the Michigan state government’s website, schools account for half of all active outbreaks in the state, or 480 out of a total 821. Outbreaks forcing an end to in-person classes or the outright canceling of classes have been widespread.

Waterford Mott High School in Oakland County, Michigan, went virtual recently due to illness and a staffing shortage. A local ABC affiliate cited a letter from the school’s principal, Craig Blomquist, to families of students explaining that the building was closed until next Monday due to staffing shortages. The district stated, “like many industries, so too is the education field in need of more

personnel in almost every capacity. Here at Waterford School District, we are actively hiring in many positions, for both full and part time, for permanent building substitute teachers, as well as transportation and food service workers.”

Galesburg-Augusta Community Schools in Galesburg also canceled classes for next Monday and Tuesday, citing a high number of absences due to illness and a shortage of certified teachers.

Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS) has canceled two days of school in December for “COVID-19 wellness days,” which will not be made up later in the school year. GRPS spokesperson John Helmholdt stated in a district email, “This school year has been particularly trying as we are facing a historic teacher and support staff shortage crisis coupled with the continued global pandemic.”

Helmholdt explained that the “COVID-19 wellness days” are being taken for fear of schools being shut down from a further hemorrhaging of teaching and other staff: “Our teachers are doubling up classes, principals are teaching every single day, we’re having to send our curriculum team into buildings to teach on almost a daily basis. At this point, we’re trying to fill the gaps and so we knew there was a need for these wellness days, and we wanted to find the best time that would work for all.”

In Detroit, COVID-19 cases are increasing at an alarming rate, with Detroit Public Schools considering going partially remote in order to slow the spread of COVID-19 among its staff. The district recently sent an email asking school board members for input on whether or not Fridays should be remote only. Terrence Martin, president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), says the number of staff sick with COVID-19 increased 260 percent, from 20 to 52, in just one week.

The union refused to call for a strike to stop the mass infection of its members, instead opting for the district’s suggestion to have Fridays off. This hardly comes as a

surprise, as the unions have been the spearhead for the reopening effort in the ruling class campaign to reopen schools in order to fully reopen the economy.

The massive loss in educational staff has not been exclusive to the pandemic, which merely accelerated ongoing processes. Enrollment in Michigan's teacher preparation program dropped by more than 70 percent over the eight years between the 2008-09 and 2016-17 school year, according to an October 2019 Bridge Michigan article. The number graduating dropping 45 percent between 2011-2017, with Bridge citing "Low salaries and negative perceptions of teaching" as driving this process.

All restrictions to stop the COVID-19 pandemic in the state have been repudiated. In June, Michigan's Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer ended mask mandates and social distancing, with a ban on mask and vaccine mandates signed into law as part of the state budget in September, drawing praise from Whitmer for its "bipartisan nature." Michigan stopped its policy of closing schools with a certain threshold of cases and currently has no threshold that would trigger school shutdowns.

In Jefferson County, Missouri, the Northwest School District has turned to hiring students amid continuing labor shortages, with a local Fox News affiliate reporting, "The district is now hiring its own high school students to fill open jobs in the district." The positions range from cooks to maintenance and after-school child care.

Kim Hawk, the district's chief operating officer, stated that "Some of the positions have been short-staffed since last year." She added, "We just have struggled to find any help at all, and if you drive around and look at the help-wanted signs everywhere, you know the competition is stiff. So, we knew we had to come up with some other plan."

Twenty-five students have reportedly applied for the jobs, which pay minimum wage. Mark Catalana, the district's chief human resources officer, said that the jobs would not involve working late nights, weekends, or holidays, which could only mean that students would be working on school days when they should be learning. This desperate move by the district once again disproves the feigned concerns about "learning loss" by advocates of school reopenings during the pandemic. The Fox affiliate also stated that, "The district said it would encourage other districts to do this as well."

Last month, Missouri's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education approved a 20-hour online course to certify substitute teachers in lieu of the original 60 college credit hours from an academic degree-granting institution in response to a severe shortage of substitute teachers.

In Washington State, Seattle, Bellevue and Kent school districts announced unexpectedly that there would be no classes Friday due to staffing shortages. The *Seattle Times*

noted, "State Superintendent Chris Reykdal said he wasn't shocked by the closures," adding, "he even registered surprise that so few school districts had to close." This year, the state has approved 10 percent more emergency substitute certificates, which allow workers without college degrees to teach a classroom.

In Kentucky, lawmakers passed a provision allowing retired teachers to return to classes full-time without impacting their pensions in response to the statewide teacher shortage. A local Spectrum news affiliate stated that school districts can temporarily go from hiring just one percent of retired teachers to up to 10 percent, with Jefferson County Public schools hiring 44 retired teachers under the provision. The district had 187 classroom vacancies as of early November.

The reason there has been such a mass exodus from the profession is because teachers have seen so many of their colleagues get sick and die, while the pandemic has totally destabilized an already precarious and under-funded public education system. Further, educators have endured the pressure of far-right parents at school board meetings, who are now literally advocating for the banning and burning of "undesirable" books, much as the Nazis did.

While teaching was once a highly-regarded profession in the US, it has been thoroughly undermined by capitalism. This decades-long, bipartisan process preceded the pandemic and has become qualitatively deepened over the past two years. As dire as the situation is now, further budget cuts are looming throughout the country, threatening to make permanent the staff losses that have already taken place once the limited pandemic funding runs dry. The unions have fully conspired with this process, before and during the pandemic.

As the winter surge begins and inflation accelerates, it is more critical than ever that educators build their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and capitalist political parties, to fight to close schools over the winter months as part of an elimination strategy aimed at ending the pandemic once and for all. This movement must also advance the struggle to fully fund public education and renovate all schools.



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