

17-year-old Philadelphia high school student dies from COVID-19

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To contact the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, email our committee at paedrankandfile@gmail.com, text (412) 336-8245 or visit this page.

Alayna Thach, a 17-year-old senior at Olney Charter High School in northside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, died on Monday after battling COVID-19 for the past week. She is now the 20th child under 18 years old to die from the virus in Pennsylvania, the result of the social policy of reopening schools before the pandemic is stopped.

A gofundme page has been set up to help with funeral costs. By Tuesday afternoon, the page had already received over \$11,700 in donations within just 15 hours of being set up.

The page describes the rapidity with which COVID-19 devastated Alayna, noting: “Alayna started getting sick from Covid only a week ago, she developed Covid Pneumonia where her lungs and heart collapsed along with the rest of her organs causing severe brain damage from hypoxia. Her care team responded with life support procedures in attempt to save her. All medical options were exhausted before her body became too weak to fight on.”

Ashanti, now a student at Pace University, went to school with Alayna last year. She told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “We used to be in the same program at school called ‘Innovate her,’ until I graduated this year. Alayna was a really nice girl, and she had her whole life ahead of her. This was her senior year.”

When asked about the reopening of schools and the demand by the WSWs that schools be kept virtual until the pandemic is ended, Ashanti stated, “I agree with you on that,” adding, “I don’t think anyone should have been sent back to school. I feel like if students weren’t sent back to school maybe Alayna’s death could have been prevented. I feel upset that this happened to her. I’m still in disbelief.”

Last year, while learning was still remote, Alayna circulated a petition calling for classes and lunches to be held outside. She expressed concern for COVID-19, as well as the mental health of fellow students and the lack of high speed internet and the other resources students needed for virtual learning.

The pandemic is ripping through schools throughout Philadelphia and the United States. Olney Charter High School does not have a dashboard on its web site of COVID-19 cases and has yet to even acknowledge Alayna’s death, but sources at the school say many students have become sick and hundreds more exposed.

Teachers were first informed that Alayna was seriously sick on Monday and were notified early this Tuesday morning that she had died.

One of Alayna’s teachers told the WSWs: “She was an honor student; it was a great loss. She was well loved by everyone. She was involved in all aspects of our school. We don’t know where she contracted the virus, at school, at home, or somewhere else. We tried hard to prevent it. If we had screening testing, maybe we could have caught it sooner. She was very popular and well loved.”

The entire School District of Philadelphia system reported 262 new COVID-19 cases for the week ending December 4, nearly double the 149 reported for each of the previous two weeks. Even this figure is an undercount, since the school district does not have a testing program and only students who self-report or go to the nurse are counted.

As with the more than 800,000 deaths across the US, Alayna’s death could have been prevented. Throughout the pandemic, the dangers confronting children and young people have been continuously downplayed. Both the Trump and Biden administrations, as well as the corporate-controlled media, have lied by saying that children do not catch COVID-19 or when they do it is not very serious.

In February, as Philadelphia’s Democratic Mayor Jim

Kenney and Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) President Jerry T. Jordan were negotiating the unsafe reopening of Philadelphia schools, US President Joe Biden lied directly to a second grader on national television, telling her “Kids don’t get ... COVID very often. It’s unusual for that to happen.” He added, “You’re in the safest group of people in the whole world.”

The same lies have been repeated throughout this fall semester, as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to take its toll on young people. On Monday, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) released its weekly report on child infections, hospitalizations and deaths from COVID-19. The report found that for the week ending December 9, there were 164,289 official new cases among children, the 18th straight week of over 100,000 official new cases. Increases were seen in all US regions, with record numbers of infections in the Northeast and Midwest and major spikes in the South and West.

The AAP also reported 17 new deaths among children, the highest figure in nearly two months. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the total number of children under 18 years old who have died from COVID-19 in the US now stands at 997.

The Philadelphia region and Pennsylvania have seen a drastic rise in the number of cases, hospitalizations and deaths since the reopening of school in August, with numbers skyrocketing in the past few weeks as cooler weather sets in.

The seven-day average of daily new cases for Philadelphia reached a trough in July at fewer than 20 new cases per day. Governor Tom Wolf, echoing the Biden administration’s claim that the pandemic was over, lifted most restrictions on indoor dining, bars and theaters, along with the reopening of schools in Philadelphia and throughout the state for fully in-person instruction. The reopening of schools was seen as necessary so that parents and caregivers could be forced back to work.

The result of these reckless reopening policies was as tragic as it was predictable. In the past 14 days, cases are up a staggering 122 percent in Philadelphia and hospitalizations are up 43 percent. Einstein Medical Center Philadelphia, the nearest hospital to Alayna’s school, is reporting that it is at 104 percent capacity.

Similar horrific numbers exist for all surrounding counties and throughout Pennsylvania. Bucks County cases are up 114 percent and hospitalizations up 40 percent in the past two weeks. Delaware County cases are up 107 percent and hospitalizations up 45 percent.

Montgomery County cases are up 105 percent and hospitalization 40 percent. Berks and Chester County cases are up 100 percent and hospitalizations 23 and 16 percent respectively.

All of Pennsylvania has seen a 52 percent rise in cases and a 21 percent increase in hospitalizations over the past two weeks.

The rapid rise in COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths is taking place even before the onset of the winter months and severe temperatures force most people indoors and prevent the opening of windows.

The much more contagious Omicron variant has been detected in Philadelphia but is not yet the dominant strain. As it spreads in Philadelphia and the rest of the region, cases are sure to increase even further.

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers also bears responsibility for the massive surge in COVID-19 cases and ultimately Alayna’s death. Alongside the national American Federation of Teachers, the PFT pushed for the reopening of Philadelphia schools, one of the largest districts in the country, as part of the push to return all students to in-person learning no matter the cost to the lives and health of teachers, students and the community.

In contrast, the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has campaigned throughout the pandemic to stop in-person learning until COVID-19 is eliminated, with full income protection for all those who cannot work. This must be combined with a massive public health campaign, including vaccinations, testing, contact tracing, the safe isolation of infected patients, and all other measures to end the transmission of COVID-19.

For more information about joining this fight, email our committee at paedrankandfile@gmail.com, text (412) 336-8245 or visit this page.



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