

Omicron identified throughout the Southern US amid continuing child, educator deaths

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As the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2 spreads through the United States, public health officials in the South warn that the region's teetering health care systems are poised for disaster. The variant has been detected in Louisiana, Georgia, Mississippi, Florida and Texas. Omicron's higher transmissibility, as well as the alarming rate of child hospitalizations in South Africa, make the immediate closure of schools for in-person learning more urgent than ever.

On top of the premature, irresponsible claims that Omicron is "mild" is the ongoing cover-up of the spread of COVID-19, particularly among children.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), between November 11 and December 9, at least thirteen children in the southern US have died of COVID-19: four in Texas, three in South Carolina, and two each in Tennessee, Georgia, and Florida.

Though these deaths should sound the alarm across the region and country, only two local news reports have mentioned any of the deaths.

Following the late August peak of the Delta surge, many state and local governments in the South used a temporary decline in cases to justify removing even the most limited mitigation measures. For example, counties across Alabama switched to "recommending" masks throughout October.

In late September, the Louisiana Superintendent of Education dropped the recommendation that students exposed to the virus quarantine, instead advising districts to let parents decide whether to quarantine their child or not. Texas and Florida ban school mask mandates altogether.

Already, the region leads the nation in the per capita rate of COVID-19 deaths. Mississippi and Alabama rank first and second, respectively. Louisiana ranks fourth, and Arkansas, Georgia and Florida are in the top ten. Most southern states have some of the lowest vaccination rates in the country. In Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, not even 50 percent of the population is double vaccinated.

As is true across the country and world, schools in the South have been the center of outbreaks.

Alabama

Although Omicron has not yet been detected in the state, Dr. Suzanne Judd, an epidemiologist and public health educator at the University of Alabama, Birmingham, said in an interview with NBC that the variant is likely already present. Judd acknowledged, "We don't do as much genotyping... as other states."

A total of 589 COVID-19 cases were reported in Alabama's K-12 school system this week, a dramatic increase over last week's 414. However, reporting is voluntary, and many school districts either do not report infections at all or fail to report consistently from week to week, meaning these numbers likely undercount the true spread.

Only one in three Alabama school districts mandated masking when schools reopened in August. The immediate surge caused most districts to reinstate masking guidelines as a compromise to avoid closing. Officials quickly moved on, however, and according to a statewide tracker, the majority of Alabama school districts had dropped masking requirements by October 25.

Alabama teacher Debra, whose name has been changed for privacy, tells the WWSW that her district refuses to quarantine students or report COVID-19 cases. "There was a positive case in my class, but students are not being told," she tells us. "Sometimes, the school will tell an entire class to quarantine and won't tell the teachers anything."

She continued, "They will never get rid of it [COVID] the way they are doing it. They continue to cram three or four students to a seat on the school bus."

Referring to the dangers and irresponsibility of the "vaccine-only" approach, she said: "People with vaccinations have gotten COVID. The virus is like special ed; it's got an IEP [Individual Education Plan] for every individual. You don't know if the vaccine will save you. Look at Colin Powell, he was vaccinated and died. Of course, he had an underlying condition, but if you're an American, you've got something else. We've got bad air, bad water, bad diet, you name it."

Speaking to the betrayals of the Alabama Education Association, which has colluded with districts to herd teachers into unsafe classrooms throughout the pandemic, she said, "The unions changed 25 years ago. They've been living off what they did in the 1970s, but they've sold out to the political parties. They are taking the money to fill their own pockets. I've dropped my membership. They got my money for years."

Texas

In Texas, over a third of all children have been infected with COVID-19, the highest level of any age group. Infection-driven seropositivity stands at 36.51 percent for children under 10, and 38.50 percent of children from ages 10 to 19, according to researchers at the University of Texas in Austin. The reports betray Texas's habitual underreporting of pediatric infection rates.

On the week of December 5, 3,781 new cases were reported among Texas school children, a 931 percent jump from the previous week's 406 cases. Among staff, 854 new cases were reported, up from the previous week's 298. As in Alabama, schools report voluntarily, and the COVID-19 Dashboard warns that some local education agencies may restrict reporting in the interest of "privacy." To date, the tracker has recorded over 229,000 student infections for this school year.

Meanwhile, the state government has outlawed even the most minimal mitigation measures. Two weeks after US District Judge Lee Yeakel struck it down, the 5th US Circuit Court of Appeals reinstated Republican Governor Greg Abbott's ban on school masking mandates on November 25.

While there is no official count, at least 80 Texas educators have died since July 1 according to an informal tracker, including math teacher Rob Sanchez, age 59, on December 1. Additionally, a preprint study from the University of Kentucky released in May linked Texas school reopenings to at least 800 deaths over a two-month period in 2020.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has documented 115 child deaths in Texas from COVID-19. The latest death was a child younger than 10 from Austin, who died between December 7 and 13, according to local news. No other details are available.

Mississippi

Since the start of the school year in August, nearly 22,000 students and nearly 4,000 staff and faculty have tested positive for COVID-19 in Mississippi. There have been 1,166 outbreaks reported in Mississippi schools between August and December. Between November 29 and December 3, 351 students and 84 staff tested positive.

Last spring, a school custodian needlessly died from the virus at the age of 76. Chance Butler of Wesson had worked for 54 years at Wesson Attendance Center, a K-12 school. According to a faculty member on social media, Mr. Wesson had retired a few years prior but had returned to work part-time and was planning to retire for good in May of 2021. He fell ill and died in February.

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication in epub format of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis.

His death, like those of Mississippi school personnel, should have served as a warning to the state government. Instead, Governor Tate Reeves, against the advice of public health experts, refused to delay school reopenings in August as the Delta variant ripped through the state.

Tate scoffed at masking recommendations, calling them "foolish" and "harmful," and refused to mandate them in schools. In the ensuing surge, Mississippi's hospitals were immediately overrun. Its singular children's hospital converted part of its parking garage into a field hospital, and several children died. "Instead of seeing women bury their parents, we're seeing them bury their children," state health officer Dr. Thomas Dobbs said in August.

Georgia

On Monday, health officials reported the death of a 4-month-old,

the youngest child to die of COVID-19 in Georgia. Twenty-four children have officially died of the virus in the state.

At least 68 educators in Georgia have died this school year alone. Of these, fifty-eight died between August 11 and November 19, at a rate of one death per day. Their ages ranged from 24 to 75, and many were vaccinated.

Sara Anderson, a cafeteria worker at Conyers Middle School, fell ill on September 15. Her supervisor told her she had no sick days left and instructed her to come in. She passed out at work on September 18. At the hospital, she was diagnosed first with COVID-19, then COVID pneumonia. She died on October 5.

Anderson's coworker and best friend, Janice Chastain, contracted the virus the same week Anderson did; she died ten days before.

The children and educators who have been infected and died of COVID-19 across the southern US represent a human sacrifice made with shrewd calculation by the federal and state governments, who need students in the classroom so their parents can work to create profits.

The media have largely kept silent, with very little being said about the deaths of either teachers or children.

Without an immediate, comprehensive intervention to stop its spread, there is no doubt that Omicron will create a new scale of disaster for the region's health systems, with schools serving as focal points of the virus's transmission.

Debra, the Alabama teacher, said in response to the announcement of the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, "We do have to take a stand. Struggles by workers are continuing. I think it's a revolution right now. You could say it began with the Arab Spring, but it's been ongoing. It's all connected. When people look back, say 50 years from now, they'll say we were rising up. We are sick of injustice, be it racial or work-related."

Teachers and parents committed to the fight against COVID-19 should write in to the WSWS to report on conditions in your area and sign up to become involved with the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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