

Baton Rouge, Louisiana teachers stage sickout as COVID-19 ravages the South

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Educators, parents and students across the South can reach out to the Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today to report on conditions in your schools and link up with educators across the region.

On Wednesday, at least 760 teachers and school staff in East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana, called out sick to protest the alarming spread of COVID-19 and the district's refusal to offer virtual learning. While the district tried to downplay the sickout, saying there were no more absences than usual, district office employees were forced to stand in for absent staff in several schools.

"Needs have gone on deaf ears," Baton Rouge teacher Rhonda Matthews told BRProud.com. Matthews said that the current surge is "too much" for teachers and students to handle in the classroom.

Sito Narcisse, East Baton Rouge Schools Superintendent, dismissed the teachers' concerns. In a statement released the day of the sickout, he claimed that the district has "been able to hear and address the concerns of those willing to speak with myself and executive staff."

The sickout followed a press conference by the East Baton Rouge Parish Association of Educators (EBRPAE), an affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA), in which the local union requested a return to virtual learning. Although the EBRPAE sponsored the event, their demands fall short of what is actually required to keep teachers and students safe, as they suggest a return to in-person once the test positivity rate falls to 10 percent, which is still extremely high.

No doubt, the union faced immense pressure from rank-and-file educators. But no illusions can be placed in the local EBRPAE to wage a serious struggle for its members. Along with the NEA and its counterpart the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the EBRPAE has played an essential role in facilitating the reopening of schools during the pandemic.

Additionally, two other unions in the district, the East Baton Rouge Federation of Teachers (EBRFT) and the East Baton Rouge Association of Professional Educators, openly attacked the sick-out. EBRFT President Angela Reams-Brown attempted to shame angry teachers in an interview with local press. She mawkishly begged teachers to consider fictional "little Mary who is homeless" and "little Johnny whose mother works at Walmart." She claimed the sick-out harmed students and parents, expressing no concern for the harm COVID-19 causes to her members or their students.

The sickout comes as COVID-19 cases have exploded across the state. At least seven schools in Baton Rouge have had to close in the first two weeks of the semester. In New Orleans, the school district recorded 2,233 active cases, shattering previous records.

Omicron is "stressing the healthcare system to the brink," said Dr. Joe Kantner, the state's health officer, with some ICUs operating with 10 percent fewer staff due to infections among nurses. Louisiana reported record-breaking increases in new infections every day last week, reaching 17,592 on January 12.

Across the South, the health system faces severe staffing shortages and is nearing ICU capacity. Child cases have skyrocketed, as pediatric hospitalizations have reached record levels nationally. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) reported over 580,000 new cases among children across the US last week, including nearly 160,000 in the South alone. Governors and school boards across the region have nevertheless doubled-down on keeping schools open for in-person learning.

Texas

Like their counterparts across the US, from New York to Oakland, students in Round Rock Independent School District outside Austin have circulated a petition and plan to walkout on January 20 if their demands for increased COVID-19 safety measures are not met.

The students demand that the district provide KN95 or higher quality masks to all students, rapid or PCR tests, contact tracing, and outdoor spaces to eat, even during inclement weather. The petition, started by high school students, has received over 600 signatures, including from hundreds of middle school students. The district admitted that due to the Omicron surge, it may reach a point where there are not enough substitutes or volunteers to keep the buildings open.

Texas reported a seven-day average of over 56,000 cases on January 13, more than tripling the previous peak of 15,000 during the Delta surge, which likewise coincided with classes reconvening in September. Pediatric hospitalizations have already surpassed the Delta surge, reaching 279 last week, a third of whom are younger than 5 years old.

Alabama

In Alabama, at least 69 children were hospitalized with COVID-19 as of Thursday, breaking Tuesday's record of 60. The steep increase in Alabama's pediatric hospitalizations gives the lie to the Biden administration's claim that Omicron does not significantly affect children. According to Dr. GiGi Youngblood

of Children's Hospital in Birmingham, Omicron appears to affect children more severely than Delta.

In an interview with CBS 42 on January 6, Dr. Youngblood said her hospital is "seeing kids get sicker than they have historically" with COVID-19. She went on to exhort parents not to bring children to the hospitals unless they are dehydrated or struggling to breathe, because effective medicines and staff are in such short supply.

The statewide test positivity rate, at 41 percent, is among the highest nationwide. The Alabama Department of Public Health now reports over 10,000 new cases daily. Alabama's ICUs were operating with a narrow margin of available beds before Omicron, and some regions are now reporting negative ICU bed availability. Birmingham only has 28 out of 514 ICU beds available.

Dr. Donald Williamson, president of the Alabama Hospital Association, told Al.com on January 12 that due to unreported positive home tests, the state's numbers are a significant undercount. He noted that hospitalizations "haven't quite doubled in a week, but we're headed that way."

In response to the rapid spread of the virus, multiple Alabama school districts, including Mobile, Selma and Montgomery, have made plans to go virtual for a single week, an entirely inadequate measure. Some schools are picking up the poorly-enforced mask mandates they abandoned in the fall, while masking remains piecemeal throughout the state's schools.

Arkansas

Arkansas has not reported pediatric hospitalizations at the same level as other Deep South states, but emergency rooms and urgent care centers are seeing record numbers of pediatric COVID-19 patients. Healthcare workers expect the reopening of schools to fuel spikes in hospitalizations throughout January and February.

Dr. Joel Tumlinson, Physician in Outbreak Response at the Arkansas Department of Health, told thv11.com that rising pediatric COVID-19 infections should not surprise anyone. Arkansas reported nearly 11,000 new cases on January 12. Given the rising number, Tumlinson says, "...there's no reason to think that kids can't catch it too. They do catch it at just about the same rate as adults."

Republican Governor Asa Hutchinson has repeated well-worn admonitions to "hold the line," downplaying the inevitable death and disability Omicron will engender in Arkansas. At least fourteen school districts have had to switch to remote instruction following the surge in cases, including Little Rock, Fayetteville, Farmington, and Greenville, though these fleeting transitions last for as little as two days and will do nothing to stop transmission.

Georgia

With a seven-day average of over 20,000 daily new cases, Georgia stands in the midst of a health crisis. On January 5, Governor Kemp announced the deployment of approximately 200 National Guard personnel to assist thinly-stretched healthcare facilities with testing, logistical support and "other needs."

The governor's call-up of guardsmen is in response to a sharp and sudden shortage of medical staff caused by infections among healthcare workers. The state adheres to the CDC's unscientific 5-day quarantine rule adjustment, meaning that the shortage will continue and healthcare workers will be forced to return to work

while sick and infect others.

Highlighting the staffing shortages in schools, principals wash dishes and district administrators act as substitute teachers in many Atlanta-area schools, while bus drivers are forced to take on extra routes.

The unofficial tracker, School Personnel Lost to COVID, has recorded 71 educators and school staff in Georgia who have died of COVID-19 since July 2021.

Mississippi

Mississippi reported 16,484 cases between January 7-9, and pediatricians say that school children are leading the surge. In the first week of school after the holidays, 10,711 students and almost 900 staff were quarantined due to COVID-19 exposure. This week, nearly 4,000 Mississippi students are out of school.

Child hospitalizations are rising again, with 17 children on Tuesday at Mississippi's only pediatric hospital and four of those requiring intensive care.

Across the state, 1,544 teachers and staff tested positive between January 3 and 7, the highest number in the pandemic to date. Multiple districts, including the 7,000 students of Vicksburg Warren District, have enacted temporary closures. Since the start of 2022, over 5,000 students and 1,800 staff have tested positive.

It is against the backdrop of the alarming spread of COVID-19 in schools, the record infections and hospitalizations of children, and the open repudiation of science and public health by the Democratic and Republican parties and the media, that the growth of opposition from the working class and youth is taking place. To bring this opposition into a unified movement requires building up an organizational framework to lead a mass struggle of the working class against the pandemic policies of the ruling elites.

The Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, a regional group of educators, parents and workers committed to the fight against the pandemic, held a well-attended meeting last weekend, with participation from throughout the South. The meeting outlined a program of action for educators to demand remote instruction, the allocation of resources for workers and families, and a global initiative to eliminate COVID-19 worldwide. We encourage all educators, parents and students to read the statement and reach out to us to get involved.



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