

New Mexico governor calls in National Guard to substitute teach as educators and child care workers fall ill from COVID

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21 January 2022

In a January 19 speech at Santa Fe High School, New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham announced that she had requested the state's National Guard to provide personnel to act as substitute teachers and child care workers. She also asked state workers to offer their services. Santa Fe High, like many other schools in the state, is currently closed due to the Omicron variant-driven surge of COVID-19 infections and resultant staffing shortages.

The Democratic governor had hinted at the move at a January 13 news conference in response to multiple teacher and child care worker absences due to a massive increase in COVID-19 cases as the Omicron variant was, as it still is, sweeping the state. The KOB news channel described it as one of several "innovative new ideas that could help schools facing staffing challenges." New Mexico currently has a shortage of over 900 substitute teachers.

Since the end of the semester break, and the predictable onset of outbreaks that have accompanied the return to in-person instruction, around 60 school districts and charter schools in the state have temporarily returned to remote learning, and some 75 child care facilities have closed either partially or completely.

Meanwhile, in order to get students back into the classroom as soon as possible, school districts have announced new requirements such as outdoor mask wearing, outdoor instruction and eating, staggered transition times, limited use of lockers and water fountains and restrictions on visitors. In other words, the districts will implement measures that will prove as ineffective as the combination of vaccinations, masks and other "mitigations" while herding children back

into unsafe schools.

Omicron has been running rampant in the state since it was first detected on December 12. By January 5, the variant accounted for more than half of cases. On January 7, the state broke the November 19, 2020, daily case record of 3,675 with 4,246, accompanied by 14 COVID-19-related deaths. The case numbers since then have surpassed that figure several times, with the state averaging more than 5,300 cases per day.

On the day of Lujan Grisham's announcement, the New Mexico Department of Health update reported 5,735 new cases, totaling 425,920, with 28 additional deaths and a seven-day positivity rate of 28.3 percent.

The latest surge has again put tremendous strains on hospital intensive care units (ICUs). New Mexico was among 19 states that the US Department of Health and Human Services reported on January 13 to have less than 15 percent ICU capacity. In fact, the data showed that New Mexico, along with Mississippi, Missouri and Rhode Island, was barely above the 10 percent threshold.

As in hospitals nationwide, the surge has brought a shortage of personnel, as medical professionals stay away either because of infections or to avoid getting infected. In response to a surge in critical cases back in early December, the Federal Emergency Management Agency requested US Navy medical personnel to be deployed to the San Juan Regional Medical Center (SJRMC) in the state's northwest Four Corners region. In November, the SJRMC was one of the first in the state to declare a crisis standard of care.

The team, consisting of two respiratory technicians, four physicians and 14 nurses, arrived on December 6, joining teams from the National Disaster Medical

System, a federally coordinated health care system. The following week, another team was sent to SJRMC from the Department of Defense.

Now the governor is calling in the military to take the place of substitute teachers who are unwilling to risk their health and lives to keep schools open. In a press release, she claimed, “The additional staffing will allow schools to avoid the disruptive process of switching between remote and in-person learning and prevent childcare programs from having to shut down altogether.”

The governor added, “Our schools are a critical source of stability for our kids. We know they learn better in the classroom and thrive among their peers. Our kids, our teachers and our parents deserve as much stability as we can provide during this time of uncertainty.” How living with recurrent outbreaks, poor or nonexistent ventilation, teacher absences and the fear of catching the virus and bringing it home to caregivers contribute to stability she did not explain.

Acting Health Secretary of the Department of Health Dr. David Scrase attempted to bolster her case with the claim that “Case counts are always lower with kids in school than when they’re at home. And we think that’s because it’s an environment where you have to wear your mask, you have to keep your distance.” To claim that kids are going to faithfully follow guidelines—which are themselves inadequate—is to engage in wishful thinking or deliberate deception.

The governor’s latest maneuver dovetails with efforts by Democratic and Republican state governments across the nation to sidetrack the growing rebellion of teachers and school workers—joined more and more by students and parents—and keep the children in the classroom so their parents go to work to produce profits. These gambits include calling on district office staff, parents, college students, bus drivers, cafeteria workers and police officers to keep the schools running.

Students, parents and teachers across the US are beginning to challenge the efforts of the ruling class and its political figures to force children back into the unsafe classrooms. Teachers, school workers and parents must form rank-and file safety committees to fight the zigzagging and inadequate measures promoted by politicians and their enablers in the unions and push for an elimination strategy which will stop the transmission of COVID-19 and end the pandemic.



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