

“We can’t teach the students if they are dead or if we are dead”

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, teacher speaks on local sickout and chaotic conditions in schools

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The Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees invite all educators, parents and students in the South to attend and share their experiences at our meeting this Sunday, January 23, 3:00p.m. CT, titled “Pause in-person learning! Stop the spread of COVID!” To register, [click here](#).

COVID-19 has spread rapidly throughout Louisiana schools following the winter break, while the state as a whole has seen record infections in January. On Tuesday, the state surpassed 1 million total infections, meaning that roughly one in five residents has contracted the virus.

Indicating the danger of allowing the highly infectious and vaccine-evading Omicron variant to spread, double-vaccinated people accounted for 43 percent of COVID-19 deaths in the state between January 6 and 12.

K-12 schools across the state recorded 8,735 cases among students and 1,719 among staff the week of January 10, representing 21 and 25 percent of all cases since August 9, respectively. In the East Baton Rouge Parish school district alone, there were 1,105 reported cases last week.

Since the start of the new year, multiple schools in the district have had to switch to virtual learning following outbreaks and severe staff shortages. The dangerous and untenable situation led 750 teachers in the district to participate in a one-day sickout last week. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a middle school teacher who participated and requested anonymity to prevent retaliation.

WSWS: The district tried to downplay the impact of the sickout. Can you comment on this?

Teacher: The district was very careful in how it worded the statements about the sickout. In one article, the administration is quoted as saying that 750 is a normal amount of absences *for the last two weeks*. I was surprised they admitted that. That’s a tremendous amount of absences and just supports what we’re saying—that there are so many teachers out that the schools can’t function.

I know of a lot of teachers who wanted to participate, but they’ve already used up their sick days because of COVID. The district gives very few COVID sick days, and teachers are using them up like candy, either because they or their family members get COVID. It’s a bad situation for educators.

What is the mood of teachers?

Teachers are angry. Even the “apolitical” teachers who usually don’t want to get involved are angry at this point. On a typical day, I go in and at 6:40 I’m already in the classroom with children even though my contract hours don’t start until 6:50. There’s nowhere else to put them. I have other students in my classroom because their teachers have COVID. Instead of getting a planning period or lunch break, I get another class. There are no breaks for us right now. We are all angry and tired.

How is the situation impacting your students?

Our kids see what’s happening. They understand that the people in charge are not doing what’s in their best interest, and they talk about this all the time. I teach middle school, and they watch the news. They realize how hard it is on the teachers too. A student asked me, “But when do you get a break? You don’t get a lunch break?”

The kids are also talking about the student walkouts. They said, “We wish we could do that,” but as middle schoolers, they’re not old enough. If they could, they would. They’re ready and mad. They feel unsafe. They’re tired of watching classmates get pulled out one by one. The amount of trauma they have been subjected to in the last two years makes us as educators question all of our morals right now. Being in-person, teachers are forced to be in a position where we’re putting the students in danger.

The most shocking thing is that now if you catch COVID, you go home for five days, then you come back whether you’re still positive or not. There are teachers at school who still have COVID but had to come back after five days. They are questioning whether they want to quit, because they feel wrong exposing their students.

How have the first two weeks since winter break been?

Insane. Every single day, between 50 and 100 kids were sent home, and teachers were going home too. The school only has 700 students. Every day, we’d be in class, and they’d announce on the intercom a list of students to be sent to the office with their belongings. Because we’re not doing virtual or hybrid, the students who quarantine miss school for five days.

It was the same with teachers. Every day another one went home after testing positive. When that happens, they split the class up, because we don’t have any subs. There was a day when I had a class of 25, but 10 were out, so I began with 15 students. Then five teachers were out, and I got 5 kids from each class. So I had 40

kids in my room. I only have seats for 30, so 10 of those kids sat on the floor. This happened on multiple days.

What do you think of the media and politicians citing “mental health” and “learning loss” as justification for keeping students in-person?

In the beginning [March 2020], when the district wanted us to go virtual, a lot of us were concerned about it because we know which kids suffer from depression and what isolation can do to them. We asked that the school board consider alternative ways of checking in with the kids. We have the resources to check in either through meal delivery or something else.

I don't understand why they didn't do more to make virtual better for everybody. It didn't have to function the way that it did. But then they wanted us in-person and back to work. From our standpoint, our district purposely sabotaged virtual. They didn't give us any training. Then when we requested to go back to virtual because it was dangerous, they said we didn't do a good job with it and blamed us.

Nobody wants to be virtual long-term, but what we're saying is that we can't teach the students if they are dead or if we are dead. With the amount of people sick in schools, we're not teaching them anyway. They're not getting an education.

How has being forced to go back in-person affected the students?

A lot of students seem different. I noticed that many are complaining about sleep anxiety or insomnia. They come to school exhausted. I think it's a combination of being afraid to catch COVID and also the stress of the situation. They feed off our emotions. When we are high stressed, they are too. They see their parents stressed as well, and they're watching kids test positive and wondering if they are next. Also, there's an expectation from the adults around them to just continue to function like everything is normal when it's not.

What is the state of case reporting and contact tracing in the district?

I think the district is downplaying the number of cases and that the numbers reported aren't accurate. Testing here is optional. We have students who don't get tested at all and others who get tested every week. There are also so many cases that it's difficult to keep up with contact tracing. An administrator told me, “We can't keep up with this. It's too much.”

Has the district made plans to switch to virtual during the surge?

The superintendent stated he absolutely won't go virtual. We have to have a certain amount of staff who are COVID-positive in order to shut down. There's no notice when that happens. If we go virtual, we find out the day before at the end of the day. Parents have to shuffle to find coverage with no notice.

What have you heard from the parents? Are any of them keeping their kids out of school?

I have parents who keep the children home for a few days when cases get so high. They are struggling, though, because the kids only have so many days they're allowed to be out before CPS [Child Protection Services] gets involved. Some kids are being pulled out of the district and sent to home school or private school, anything that will allow them to be in a smaller setting.

The district and media have gone out of the way to pit teachers and parents against each other. They try to blame the parents' concerns on teachers, and it's not right. I sympathize with the parents. I talk to them. Their situation is impossible, and our situation as teachers is impossible too.

The teacher shared the following public Facebook post written by an East Baton Rouge parent:

My son just called me to come pick him up because he did not feel safe at school. 9 teachers were out on actual COVID quarantine, not the sickout. The remaining teachers were forced to absorb all of the students. He was crammed into a single classroom with so many students that there weren't enough desks for everyone.

It was the teacher's scheduled planning period but there was no room for a break today. The lack of staff at the school made the regular lunch schedule chaos so they decided to eat in the classroom. In a crowded room so full that some kids had to sit on the floor, masks started coming off and my son decided that he needed to get out of there. This is the kind of situation that our teachers are facing every day.

[Baton Rouge Superintendent] Narcisse would like you to believe that everything is fine, but the truth couldn't be farther from that. The Omicron variant is tearing through our schools causing unmanageable and dangerous staffing shortages and putting the remaining students & teachers at risk while furthering spread. Yet it seems like the only plan that the Superintendent has is to ride it out.

This is why some teachers decided to take direct action today. Not because they're selfish, because they are at a breaking point. The whole system is at a breaking point and the Sup. has buried his head in the sand.”

Can you comment on the role of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association?

Our local union, the LEA (Louisiana Education Association) called the sickout, but we received no support from the national union (the National Education Association). We also have the Louisiana Federation of Teachers in Baton Rouge, but they refused to support the sickout.

Thank you for your time.



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