

“It really is as if they are saying everyone just needs to catch COVID”

Riverside, California, school bus driver speaks out against mass infection in schools

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K-12 schools in Riverside County, California, have been a major source of COVID-19 infections among teachers, school employees, and students. Riverside is located just east of Los Angeles and has a current positivity rate of 33.5 percent with more than 1,000 COVID-19 hospitalizations. Since December 2020, educational facilities accounted for 45.7 percent of all reported COVID-19 outbreaks in the county. COVID-19 reporting in the schools has been limited this month, but as of January 10 there have been 20 outbreaks in school settings.

Ann, a public school bus driver in Riverside County, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the conditions in elementary schools in her area. To maintain anonymity, Ann's name has been changed for this article.

Regarding the surge in infections in recent weeks due to the Omicron variant, Ann stated, “Students are getting sick, as well as teachers and bus drivers. We are also short on drivers and are trying to get help covering routes.

“We do think that bus drivers are getting sick from students. There has been low attendance and it seems like a cycle of infection that's going around. Six to nine of our kids will be sick throughout the day, leaving school. Then the next week another batch of kids gets sick. Then you see two to three drivers leaving a week. It really is as if they are saying everyone just needs to catch COVID, which is so sad to hear.”

Ann expressed frustration and confusion over the constant loosening of safety policies in her district, saying, “Our district is now allowing people with

asymptomatic cases to drive school buses because there is a low number of drivers. But they can still infect others! We are confused. When the pandemic started it was two weeks quarantine, then ten days, now within five days, and if you have it you are still spreading it!

“At the beginning of the semester, we were told to double mask with a cotton mask and a surgical blue mask. We were also told to change the surgical mask daily and change the cotton mask every eight days. It has been over two weeks and we have only been given one surgical mask and one cloth mask. Are we expected to supply our own masks? I saw that CDC guidelines say we are supposed to wear N95 masks. We aren't seeing any help from anybody.

“Back in 2020 when schools were closed, during the fall semester, we were constantly in meetings. Back then we were told that buses were going to be sprayed with disinfectant twice a week. This is still protocol, but even this isn't happening regularly. Regarding ventilation they just told us to have two windows always open. I will say that no one leaves the yard with their windows down when it's freezing in the mornings. And still, two windows are not enough to get good airflow.”

Ann also described an incident that showed the level of infection taking place among students: “Last week I was really touched by a student. She wasn't on my bus before winter break. On Monday, she came on the bus quiet. I can always tell how my kids are feeling and she had a sad look on her face.

“As we were driving, I asked her, ‘Are you new? I don't remember seeing you.’

“She looked at me teary-eyed and responded, ‘no, but yeah.’ Then she said, ‘I had COVID.’

“I told her, ‘It’s ok, I’m so sorry. But you’re ok now, you’re better.’

“She started to cry. When I asked her what was wrong, she said, ‘kids at school are making fun of me for having COVID.’

“I asked her, ‘what about your friends?’

“She said, ‘A lot of kids in my class have it.’”

Ann commented, “I was so upset and tried to console her. This really bothered me as I’m sure there are so many kids who are going through something like this. Not only does she have to deal with having COVID, now it’s a mental thing because she is getting bullied.”

Discussing the need to close schools as part of a broader strategy to eliminate COVID-19, Ann stated emphatically, “We shouldn’t be waiting for a higher authority. Schools need to be closed now! Not forever, but to keep everyone safe, students, teachers, drivers, during this surge.”

Describing another incident, Ann said, “I went to my daughter’s high school this week to pick her up to get tested because I found out someone in our family had symptoms. When I entered the building with all the offices, all the admin and staff were in there in one room talking and laughing without their masks on. I was shocked because here I am, coming on to campus and there’s someone there making sure I have my mask on but the people in the office aren’t even following the guidelines!

“Later that day, I asked my daughter about conditions in her classrooms. She said, teachers sit with their masks down. People are sniffing and coughing, and no one is sent to the nurse’s office. No protocols are being enforced. My husband and I are so upset with the fact that these guidelines are not being enforced. We are thinking of just taking my daughter out of school until the surge passes.”

Ann also described the conditions among special education students and staff who have faced high levels of infections since schools reopened. Districts such as Ann’s are loosening COVID safety protocols, which are further exacerbating the surge conditions in the area.

“As transit drivers we drive general education elementary students. There is another set of drivers that drive special education students. In our district, SpEd

students are getting so sick with COVID. Only the drivers and teachers really know about this. We talk to each other and find out why certain routes are not running. We have realized that there are no SpEd students to transport because they were getting COVID.

“Since schools reopened, most SpEd drivers have been at home with no pay because the routes were closed, and more recently they have been shifting around divers to drive on the general ed routes in order to give them pay. No one reported on this, no news media, nothing. They kept it hush-hush so no one knew about it.

“They reopened the schools and look what happened! All these SpEd students, they are letting them get sick. These are kids with some of the worst health conditions or are more vulnerable if they catch it.”



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