

“I can’t take the stress anymore, it’s too much”

Nebraska teacher and parent describe brutal conditions in schools during Omicron surge

Erin Miller
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Nebraska’s most populous city, Omaha, hit the grim milestone of 1,000 official deaths from COVID-19 this month, while the state as a whole has now lost 3,755 people to COVID-19. As in many other areas of the country, health care systems and their staff are strained to the maximum, with occupancy levels reaching 98 percent in many hospitals.

In some areas of Nebraska, COVID-19 patients have taken up 30 to 40 percent of hospital capacity during the Omicron surge, forcing one hospital to open a trailer on its grounds for respiratory therapy and two trailers for COVID-19 treatment infusions. The situation in rural areas is exacerbated by incredibly low vaccination rates, with some of Nebraska’s counties hovering near 30 percent.

In the midst of this nightmare scenario, Nebraska’s political establishment is pursuing the homicidal “herd immunity” strategy pioneered by Trump and now adopted by the Biden administration. When Douglas County (Omaha) Health Director Dr. Lindsay Huse ordered an emergency mask mandate in January, Republican Governor Pete Ricketts threw his support behind Nebraska Attorney General (AG) Doug Peterson, who tried and failed to end the “unlawful” mandate via the Nebraska court system.

Despite the surge of the Omicron variant, schools continue to be in-person across Nebraska. In Omaha, the local children’s hospital has seen pediatric hospitalizations rise to 18, with more children experiencing multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C), a potentially lethal condition linked to COVID-19. The local teachers union has taken no actions, and when teachers and parents have voiced their concerns to the board of Omaha Public Schools, they have gone unheard.

Amanda, a 2nd-grade teacher in Nebraska, and LaTrisha, a parent with a child in Omaha Public Schools (OPS), shared their views and concerns with the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Amanda expressed her anger with the current situation, stating, “I think the most frustrating part is the fact that it’s

almost that the union leadership is so afraid of parent backlash that they don’t listen to our voices, the experts in our field. District leadership is never in our building. They don’t come in. They don’t see what we go through. They don’t ask. That’s what makes it so frustrating right now, just not having our voices heard.

“Right now, it’s all of the duties we have on top of COVID. You would think they would put a pause on professional development. The duties are just increasing and increasing. What is asked from us is increasing. We’re in the middle of a surge. This is the most cases we’ve ever had and they’re bringing us all together to do professional development. Something that we could have logged in at home and covered. Trainings that we have to do right now when we’re trying to play catch up with kids that are a couple grade levels behind. I just feel like what they’re asking from us is overwhelming.

“There’s not enough time in the day. We have students that are literally two grade levels behind. I have three students who were home-schooled. They came in as non-readers. They weren’t even learning. And so trying to catch them up when you have all of these expectations, MAP [standardized] testing, all of these things that we have to hit. It’s hard. It’s daunting.”

Amanda also noted the safety of her family being of huge concern. She said, “I have a toddler at home I have to protect. She’s not vaccinated yet. She can’t be vaccinated. It’s scary. I just feel like all they’re all saying ‘we have to get back to normal.’ Now my administrator says our conferences are in February and they are on Zoom. However if parents request, they can do in-person. What? No? Why would they do that? It’s not safe. They’re just really trying to get back to this norm and we’re not anywhere close to that yet.

“They don’t provide us the proper PPE. Our district has never offered to give us N95 masks. That is something that we’ve asked our union president. Our district is not doing

testing for students and staff. It's mindblowing how they're trying to get back to 'normal' so quickly. It's frustrating and that's why I hope I am able to resign at the end of the year. I can't take the stress anymore. It's too much."

She added, "I think what I wish people knew is how difficult it is to teach in a pandemic. It's so much stress. You're just constantly worried about kids getting sick, about bringing it to your family. It's just nonstop worry all the time.

"It's a toxic atmosphere especially when nobody listens to you. I hope I can resign because I can't take it mentally any more. You feel like teachers are the bottom. We're supposed to be educating our kids and we can't even do that because we're so stressed. There's so much on our plates that we can't even help with the education that they need."

LaTrisha, who like many parents is concerned about the safety of her children and teachers, expressed sympathy with the plight of teachers, saying, "What I've heard about safety precautions and PPE in school is that they are continuing to make sure students have masks, are wearing them properly, distancing them while they're having lunch. So, they split the classroom, so half in the cafeteria and half in the classroom to eat lunch, six feet apart.

"I've been in the school before the pandemic. It's a beautiful school and it's very clean, but I don't know what each child has going on with them and it is difficult for one parent to deal with one child on the proper measures as far as protecting yourself when you're out in public. I do trust that teachers and staff are doing everything in their power. But I don't have the expectation that they have it under control, because that's not possible.

"You know, when you're dealing with so many children, trying to make sure they're learning on top of distancing and masking, etc., it's difficult! I don't want to have to expect that of teachers and schools at this time. I think that what would be best is lowering the amount of students within the class. I love my son's teachers. I think they do a wonderful job. They communicate with me. It's not easy. It can't be easy for them."

Unfortunately, LaTrisha's son was exposed to and contracted COVID-19 at his school. She said, "My son's home now because he tested positive for COVID on Monday. We received an email notification on Thursday last week that he was exposed, and four days later he tested positive. We've kept him home, had him isolating, wearing a mask.

"We want to be sure that he can deal with the virus and be free of it before he resumes normal activity. I am very hesitant to send him back to school. It's not something I want to do. I'm at the point where if [the board] can't come up with a solution for an option to have remote learning, I

am needing to pull him from the school system and start home schooling. It isn't something that seems feasible for our family to continually, you know, to isolate him when I know the exposure is going to continue to happen. It hasn't slowed down. I got two more emails since the email about his exposure. It's just something I don't anticipate slowing down at this point."

LaTrisha also expressed concerns over the safety of all children during this pandemic and spoke on what she's heard from other parents during this time, saying, "It makes me really sad because there was a woman recently that made a comment on a [social media] post that I made about pushing for remote learning. She had been stressed out because an older child of hers got COVID, she got the email notification from the school and didn't see it, and she has a four-month-old premature baby who got COVID. They could have avoided that exposure. It's not right that we have to pick and choose between health and education.

"I just expect the environment in schools is really harsh for teachers. No matter how hard they try, kids are kids. They're out there, they've got allergies, they sneeze, COVID is there. There's only so much you can do with multiple rooms of little people. It isn't possible to avoid an airborne illness. I think they're being burnt out. I think it's unfair. I don't think it's necessary. Every single teacher, every single staff member, you're appreciated, your job is important."

LaTrisha tried reaching out to the OPS school board ahead of their meeting. In line with how school boards across the nation have responded, they were not particularly receptive to her concerns. "The board meeting was a little odd to me. The teachers that stood at the podium and spoke were very emotional. It was a big deal. They're stressed out. They were pleading for help."

Commenting on the lack of support for remote learning from most board members, she said, "I'm pretty disappointed the board members didn't have more to say. It seems like they are leaning toward in-school full time.

"It was like a medieval courtroom. It seems strange. It was not right. It felt like they had a time limit, they had to state their name, spell name, give home address. They were timed, told 1 minute remaining. And then nothing. No feedback. No 'we see you.' It was just, 'Next person.' The teachers had so much to say and so many emotions. It was shocking."



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