

Texas teacher exposes nightmarish conditions in schools with COVID

Tony Jackson
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The Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will be meeting on Sunday, February 6 at 2:00p.m. Central Standard Time. Workers, students and parents alike are encouraged to register and invite coworkers, family and friends.

On Monday, Texas surpassed 80,000 deaths from COVID-19 according to Worldometer, the second highest number in the US after California. The state of 29 million accounts for almost 9 percent of the 900,000 people who have perished from COVID-19 in the country. Soon, more Americans will have died in Texas from the pandemic than were killed in the Korean and Vietnam wars combined.

This is a direct result of keeping businesses open and profits flowing to Wall Street no matter what the cost. Schools, which have been forced to remain in-person so children can be warehoused while their parents work, have become a leading source of viral transmission. Five months into the school year, one in every eight teachers in Texas has gotten COVID-19, with 539,000 total students and staff being infected, according to the Department of State Health Services.

As a consequence, public schools are in a state of acute crisis. A teacher in a North Texas school district spoke recently to a fellow educator and member of the Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee about the conditions. She asked to remain anonymous, so as not to face retribution from administrators for speaking out.

TJ: So, let me start off with this. At my school, we didn't really get anything in the form of PPE. A lot of teachers have asked for more supplies and support, but for the most part teachers have had to come out of pocket for anything beyond a couple of surgical masks. Is that an experience that you're familiar with?

B: What was supposed to be PPE was just a bag of

wipes—hand wipes—and one package of those cheap blue masks that don't do anything. And that was our total PPE package for the semester. We got that in August and there hasn't been another round since. No supplement, no stipend, no nothing.

TJ: One thing I've been trying to bring attention to is how low the quality of education is in-person right now. For my high school history students at all levels, there's just no learning going on. What is the situation like at your school? Have you or other teachers been forced to make adjustments on the fly?

B: Oh my god, you have no clue. We have so many teachers out. And it's hard to get subs, because they all know that they're going into a situation where the virus is just everywhere. There is no masking or social distancing enforcement and there never really has been.

This week teachers are having to double up classes and take them to the auditorium while there are multiple other teachers with combined classes teaching in different ends or corners of the auditorium. So you have three, four, five combined classes at a time sitting in seats where they can hear bits and pieces of lectures from all the other classes or try to get their friends' attention across the way.

It is ridiculous. I will never see how that would be better than virtual. We've had kids with COVID, and we've had staff with COVID. Nonstop. It is not getting better. I don't know what their standard is.

I'll say this. I don't think they'll close no matter what. I've heard some schools, if they get below a certain amount of people out then they'll go virtual regardless of what happens with everything else. I don't know how bad it would have to get.

TJ: Do you have a virtual curriculum for the kids who are out with COVID? Is there any way for them to interact with you?

B: We have no virtual curriculum, but I do put all my things in Google Classroom. The kids under quarantine or sick have been home, so they can only listen in when I'm doing the in-person kids at the same time. And they go to the Google Classroom to listen in, saying "Hello? Hello?" in the classroom expecting for a teacher to respond.

They don't want to make it easy for kids to be virtual, even though it's mostly the kids who have COVID-19 or are quarantined. They want us to put the notes and assignments up online while also expecting feedback at the same level as what they are in the classroom. But at the same time, you have more kids signing into the Zoom for remote every day with an administration that doesn't want them online at all. It's a total mess.

TJ: What has been your school administration's approach to reporting positive cases amongst faculty and staff? Is it different from how they report or address positive cases for students—if they do at all?

B: My friend in admin says they are under strict orders: "Don't tell us [the teachers] anything like that." You have to find out about it from the students once you ask about a kid who's been out, or from noticing one of the teachers hasn't been there for a while, or because the parents of the students tell you or you see it on social media. Last year they used to send out emails. But now we don't know. We just don't know. Unless you hear it, you have no idea.

The way I hear that kids are out with COVID is through the kids. Straight up. That's how I know. I'll ask, "Has anyone heard from so-and-so?" And they'll tell me, "Oh so-and-so is out with COVID." They've been out with COVID for an extended time, and the kids all pretty much know, but there is nothing from admin. They don't want to find out. If they did any digging then they would obviously have to close the schools.

TJ: I know you mentioned a teacher in your school who has been placed on a ventilator. How did you find out about that? From admin? Or from other teachers?

B: The teacher that's out now, we just found out on Friday that she was in the ICU. She had been out of school for almost two weeks. The only reason they told us was because she had asked her father to tell all the teachers what was going on with her. They only held the meeting once it was obvious that we all knew

already.

The teachers were all shocked because they had no idea. We have no information. You would like to know if teachers around you have COVID or if you've been exposed. It's almost like they think as long as they don't talk about it then it doesn't exist. That's the feeling that I get.



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