

Keeping schools open during the pandemic is causing a mental health crisis for US teachers

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The continuing uncontrolled pandemic is having a devastating impact on the mental health of teachers in the US. Overworked and severely underpaid, many teachers are leaving the profession, deepening the crisis in public education.

According to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), there are almost 7 percent fewer K-12 public school teachers now than at the start of the pandemic. Between February 2020, before the pandemic took hold in the United States, and December 2021, the EPI found that total public school employment, including support staff, was down 376,300 positions, a 4.7 percent decline.

The pandemic only accelerated the long-standing trend of declining public school employment. In the years following the 2008 financial crisis—caused by rampant speculation and outright fraud by the capitalist ruling class—states made huge cuts to public education. These cuts were not fully restored by the time the pandemic hit. The EPI determined that if school staffing had kept pace with student enrollment growth since the 2008-2009 school year, public school employment would be 658,000 higher than it was in December 2021, or 8.6 percent higher than the actual employment levels.

These downward trends are also reflected in college teacher preparation programs. In 2019, prior to the pandemic, the number of students graduating with teaching degrees was 25 percent fewer than in 2009.

Many teachers are leaving the profession because of incredible workloads, only exacerbated by the pandemic, causing unsustainable stress and burnout. In a June 2021 RAND survey, 78 percent of teachers reported experiencing frequent, job-related stress, compared to 40 percent of employed adults overall. Twenty-five percent of teachers reported symptoms of depression, compared with 10 percent for the adult population as a whole. As a result, nearly a quarter of teachers said they were likely to leave their jobs by the end of the 2020-2021 school year, compared with one in six teachers who reported being likely to leave prior to the pandemic.

The National Education Association (NEA), the largest teachers' union in the country, conducted a January survey of 3,621 of its members. The results paint a devastating picture of working conditions in schools and stand as an indictment of the NEA for its failure to take any meaningful measures to improve the lives of their members during the worst public health crisis in at least a century. Instead, the NEA, along with the American Federation of Teachers, has snuffed out every strike waged by teachers since a wave of walkouts began with a wildcat strike by West Virginia teachers in 2018. Since the start of the pandemic, the NEA and AFT have functioned as the most reliable enforcers of the criminal back-to-school, back-to-work policies first of Trump, then Biden.

An astounding 91 percent of teachers responding to the NEA survey reported that stress from the pandemic was either very serious (61 percent) or somewhat serious (30 percent). As a result of this stress, 90 percent reported that burnout among teachers is either very serious (67 percent) or somewhat serious (23 percent).

More than 55 percent of respondents to the NEA survey now have plans to leave teaching earlier than expected due to the pandemic. When the NEA first asked this question, in July 2020, near the beginning of the pandemic and when most schools were closed for in-person learning, only 28 percent said they planned to leave the profession early. While that percentage increased slightly to 32 percent in March of 2021 (when a majority of school districts were still providing a remote option and vaccines were beginning to provide some protection), it shot up 18 percentage points between July of 2021 and January 2022, corresponding to the 2021-2022 school year when nearly every school district in the country was fully open for in-person learning and virtual options were almost completely eliminated.

In the NEA survey, 95 percent of teachers identified improved ventilation as the most pressing issue to mitigate the effects of the pandemic in schools, but only 38 percent reported having adequate systems in place, and only 28 percent reported that their ventilation system provided

sufficient protection to feel safe working in-person.

Responsibility for the full reopening of schools, with completely inadequate safety measures, lies with President Biden, whose stated goal even before taking office was to force open schools throughout the country. Within weeks of taking office, Biden also infamously lied on CNN about the dangers of COVID to children, telling a second grader that “You’re not likely to be able to be exposed to something and spread it to mommy or daddy.”

In fact, with schools serving as a major vector of transmission, the Biden administration’s policy has led to tens of millions of children becoming infected with COVID. Many children have then unwittingly infected their parents, leading in many cases to their deaths. In the United States, at least 215,000 children have lost at least one parent or caregiver to COVID, leaving the survivors with incalculable trauma and potentially long-lasting mental health issues. Dr. Julie Kaplow, executive director at the Trauma and Grief Center at Children’s Hospital New Orleans, has even warned of an epidemic of “psychological long COVID” for these children.

In addition, while politicians and well-heeled pundits continuously claimed, without evidence, that schools had to be reopened for the sake of mental health, in fact, as the NEA and RAND surveys show, the mental health of teachers has been completely sacrificed to reopen schools.

A Baltimore teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she is leaving a classroom position to become a literacy coach next school year because of the high stress levels, which have only intensified during the pandemic.

“The amount of extra tasks teachers have been expected to take on because of COVID has been exhausting,” she said. These include, “COVID testing every Monday, reaching out to families whose students test positive (and close contacts for the first part of the year), maintaining seating charts, regulating mask wearing (while it was still required), creating assignments for students to complete in quarantine, communicating with families about assignments and quarantine situation, extra SEL [social-emotional learning] lessons because of [student] social delay, and after school tutoring every Monday and Wednesday to ‘catch kids up.’”

Teachers in the NEA survey identified many easy-to-implement solutions to the crushing stress that threatens to drive tens of thousands of teachers out of the profession, including raising salaries, providing additional mental health support for students, hiring more teachers, hiring more support staff, reducing paperwork load, reducing standardized testing, and hiring more counselors and school psychologists.

But federal, state and municipal governments are cutting school funding, not increasing it. School officials in New

York City, San Francisco, Oakland, Minneapolis, Detroit and other cities are using the decline in student enrollment during the pandemic to close schools, lay off educators and slash programs. This is driving educators into new struggles, which will necessarily involve a revolt against the AFT and NEA and its local affiliates and demands for a radical redistribution of society’s resources.

“Part of the solution to me is more positions in schools for nurses or other qualified professionals to take on the task of managing COVID in a school setting,” the Baltimore teacher said. “And paying teachers more. Teacher pay doesn’t justify the amount of work teachers do on a daily basis. It’s insulting.”

The resources certainly exist to easily implement all of these measures. Last week, President Biden signed a bill authorizing another \$40 billion for the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, on top of \$13 billion approved in the last few months. As the *World Socialist Web Site* recently noted, if this \$53 billion were directed to the needs of the working class rather than war, 500,000 teachers could be hired at \$106,000 a year in salary and benefits. Alternatively, this sum could “provide a \$6,000 raise to every nurse, teacher and nursing home worker in America (9.25 million workers).”

In fact, \$53 billion represents a drop in the bucket of the annual American war budget, which amounts to at least \$782 billion for the current fiscal year. If these vast expenditures for the means of destruction were instead used to meet social need, every child could have a high-quality education, with fully supported and well-resourced teachers and support staff. For that to happen, educators should join the ever-growing movement of rank-and-file workplace committees, independent of the unions, and join with broader sections of the working class in the fight for socialism.



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