

Parents and teachers defend Seattle principal fired for exposing district's abandonment of contact tracing

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Teachers, parents and students: Contact the World Socialist Web Site to send us statements of support for Catherine Brown, and tell us what the COVID-19 situation is in your classrooms.

Over two weeks ago, on May 10, Seattle high school principal Catherine Brown was fired for informing families of changes to the district's COVID-19 guidelines and the consequences these changes would have on the school. The district fired Brown to prevent the further exposure of the fact that the COVID-19 guideline changes were intended to cover up transmission rates and further abandon mitigation measures.

Principal Brown revealed what was at stake in an email sent May 10 to parents and staff of Cleveland STEM High School. The email said: "I have been under investigation for an allegation that I disobeyed a directive. The specific allegation at issue is that I failed to follow a directive to withhold information about changes in COVID-19 contact tracing from the Cleveland community. While the process for determining if I will be subject to discipline for that is not yet complete, as you now know, SPS [Seattle Public Schools] has determined that I will not be the principal at Cleveland High School next year." Brown then pointed to the fact that "the interviewing of individuals, including staff, to determine if a close contact occurred will only occur in a limited number of cases with this change [to the guidelines]."

When Brown chose to inform families in January of the change to the guidelines, COVID-19 case numbers in Seattle were rising rapidly during the the Omicron surge. Over 50,000 students were sent back to in-person learning, even as 2,200 to 5,600 cases were confirmed

each day in the city of Seattle. Hundreds of students were sent home each day due to COVID-19, and for the first three weeks of January, over 1,000 cases a week were reported on the Seattle Public Schools Covid Dashboard.

From the week ending May 7 of this year to May 20, 1,675 COVID-19 cases were recorded by SPS, eclipsing the record set by the Omicron surge. But now, individual contact tracing is no longer offered, and the mask mandate has been abandoned since early March. Students who have tested positive are now able to return to school after only five days of quarantine, and students and staff are no longer required to be tested even if they are symptomatic. The guidelines "recommend" students and staff get tested if they are symptomatic. Under these protocols, it is nearly impossible to identify asymptomatic cases.

As of May 27 the CDC reports at least 1,527 children have died from COVID-19, and more than 13 million children have been infected. These are only official counts, and with the lack of any systematic reporting, these numbers are undoubtedly far higher. The abandonment of safety measures creates enormous risks for huge numbers of children suffering from Long COVID.

Many teachers, parents and school staff are outraged by Brown's firing. On May 20, a protest was held in defense of Brown outside the high school. The principal set to replace Brown, Marni Campbell, withdrew her application hours before the protest began.

Numerous parents and teachers left comments on social media in response to the firing of Brown, declaring it "unbelievable!" or "this is such bs!" One

commenter observed, “so they fired her for clearly communicating a change in district policy?”

Another parent spoke to the WSWS about the logic behind the mass infection policy. “I just returned to work from having COVID after two and a half years. The lack of contact tracing is horrible. It all comes to money. They want to reopen the economy. So kids have to go somewhere in order for their parents to work.”

Victoria, a parent in Oregon, described the impact COVID-19 has had on her family. “I’m immunocompromised, and until recently, my 84-year-old mother had been living with us. Unfortunately, she had an injury and contracted COVID in a health care setting in February, and my immunocompromised youngest brother died of COVID in February. All vaxxed. Now that mom has had COVID, she can no longer stand or walk, so she is in a care facility. That said, we have been extremely cautious, and my daughter has been going to school online since the first shutdown.

“While she has done very well with online learning, and we love the online school her district has put together, she is in middle school and would love to return to classroom learning. I feel like our Department of Education here in Oregon has really failed students by suggesting, but not actually utilizing, all the layers in that layered approach to COVID safety that they keep referencing.

“Masks are suggested but not required, ventilation systems have been updated ‘where possible’ with very little information on where it was possible or why it wasn’t possible in places. I am trying to find a way to safely send my kid back to school, but her school doesn’t allow students to eat outdoors, which seems to be a huge hole in that layered approach. Contact tracing is an important part of that layered approach.

“Japan didn’t get access to vaccines as quickly as the US did, but their COVID numbers and deaths are far below ours, in part due to serious contact tracing practices. It’s hard to feel that the school takes my child’s safety seriously if they won’t use the tools available to slow the spread of COVID; it is obvious that they don’t take safety seriously if they decide to do even less and then hide the fact. The schools are supposed to be working with parents to support students—and not just academically. I applaud this

principal for taking her commitment to students and their families seriously and keeping families informed about changes that could impact their health and safety.”



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