

Global Workers' Inquest survey exposes the ongoing impact of the pandemic in US schools

Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (US)
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As part of the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee US (ERFSC) conducted a survey among educators, parents and students about how the pandemic has impacted them. The survey was shared on social media and received responses from every region of the United States, including from New York, California, Tennessee, Michigan, Ohio, Alabama and other states.

Questions inquired about issues such as the scale of infection, death and Long COVID in the schools; what mitigation measures are in place; whether information about infections is provided to staff and families; and the impact of budget cuts and staff shortages.

The responses prove that despite proclamations by President Biden that “the pandemic is over,” it continues to ravage school communities and impact every part of life, including the health, economic stability and emotional well-being of teachers and students. Further, the survey collected significant evidence of a mass cover-up of the pandemic inside schools, one that has been carried out by both capitalist parties with the critical assistance of the trade unions.

The ongoing spread of COVID-19 and other viruses in schools

During the nearly four months since schools and universities opened for the fall semester, RSV, influenza, and COVID-19 have surged inside schools without any mitigations in place to stop the spread of infection. As schools head into the winter months, students, staff and their families face yet another winter of mass infection, death and long-term illness. The “triple-demic” has already thrown the health care system into a state of collapse, with many children’s hospitals across the US reaching or nearing capacity due to the spread of illness.

In total, the policy of mass infection has been a brutal experiment carried out against an entire generation. Outdated information from the CDC shows that at least 86 percent of US children have been infected with COVID-19 and at least 1,956 have died. Over 200,000 children in the US, and 10 million worldwide, have lost a parent or primary caregiver. At least 8,000 active and retired educators in the US have died from the disease. Adding to this, a recent survey by EdWeek found that nearly 1 in 5 principals, district leaders and teachers surveyed had experienced Long COVID, a debilitating set of symptoms which can affect nearly every organ for months or years after the acute illness.

Testimony to the Inquest survey demonstrates that this brutal experiment is ongoing with widespread infection and re-infection, while nearly all mitigation measures have been thrown out.

A parent in Alameda, California, noted, “There is widespread illness. Zero mitigation. The truancy officer is harassing parents of kids who stay home because they are sick or exposed to someone who tested positive.”

One teacher in Arizona said, “Almost everyone has had [COVID]. I

have students with long haul COVID and health effects. One of our support staff is in her 30s and on oxygen for the rest of her life. I would estimate 10 to 15 staff members district wide died from it or complications of it.”

A parent of an elementary school student in Knoxville, Tennessee, shared, “I have had COVID-19 3 times. My husband and children have had it once. I suffer from long-COVID. They do not. There have been 4 deaths in staff within our school district related to COVID-19 (that we know of) and 1 child. This information is not given or talked about in the media. Our schools will not allow COVID to be discussed.”

One New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) staff member noted, “Yes—just this semester, multiple staff have had COVID 2+ times. Almost everyone in the school (and I mean every last person, adult and child) have had COVID at least once over the past calendar year, and many students likely had it over the summer while on summer break. One student in my district died in September of this year. Two teachers and a custodian have died this calendar year. We have a noticeable staff shortage on a daily basis due to call-outs; after school programs often cannot stick to their scheduled times because their staff are also out sick.”

The cover-up of the pandemic and the abandonment of mitigations

In launching the Inquest, the WSWS stressed that this initiative was necessary in order “to break through the cover-up, falsifications, and misinformation that have been deployed to justify policies responsible for the avoidable deaths of millions since the initial detection of SARS-CoV-2.”

In November 2021, capitalist governments worldwide, led by the Biden administration in the United States, used the emergence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant as a pretext to proclaim that the population must “learn to live with” COVID-19 forever. In order to enforce this, the Biden administration launched a systematic dismantling of COVID-19 testing and reporting systems in order to blind the population to the scale of disease and, with the full complicity of the US CDC, advocated the abandonment of all existing mitigation measures including quarantine, isolation, and masks.

These policies—the cover up of the spread of infection and the abandonment of protective mitigations—have been adopted and embraced by school districts across the US.

Asked whether adequate information regarding infections was being conveyed by their schools, districts or unions, 90 percent answered no.

A teacher in Tennessee responded, “Not at all. COVID swept through the building when we went back to school this August. It was only through the whisper network that I found out half of the central office staff

was out with COVID.”

A teacher in New York City wrote, “Nope; ‘CDC guidance’ is being followed. The same old misinformation regarding kids ‘not spreading COVID’ still floats around.”

At the same time, mitigations have been almost universally thrown out or made optional. Asked whether there are mask mandates in the schools, 100 percent answered that wearing masks was optional and that the vast majority of students and staff were not wearing masks.

As far as modernized air ventilation and filtration systems, necessary tools to remove airborne viruses such as SARS-CoV-2 from indoor spaces, multiple teachers noted that their classrooms do not even have basic air conditioning or functional windows.

One teacher said, “There is no air conditioning in most rooms. The filter lights are on and no one knows how to clean them. The filters that we had and used in the beginning of the year in some rooms are no longer being used because they don’t work properly anymore and no one knows how to clean them.”

The role of the teachers’ unions throughout the pandemic

Forcing the population back into deadly workplaces and schools, proven centers of viral transmission, would not have been possible without the collaboration of the trade union bureaucracies. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the national teachers’ unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), have played the critical role of herding teachers and students into unsafe classrooms, where millions were infected, and thousands died as a result.

The dozens of strikes and sickouts by educators in every part of the US—Chicago, New York, Minneapolis, Sacramento, Montgomery and more—were systematically sabotaged and isolated by the AFT, the NEA and their local affiliates. In 2021, during the height of the Delta surge, AFT President Randi Weingarten hosted a town-hall with the far-right group Open Schools USA and Jay Bhattacharya, co-author of the mass-infection manifesto, the Great Barrington Declaration. At both the AFT’s and the NEA’s recent conventions, there was a complete cover-up of the pandemic’s ongoing threats to educators and students.

At the local level, asked what protections their unions had fought for, most teachers responded little to nothing. Indicating the chasm between the rank-and-file membership and the union bureaucracy, nearly a quarter (24 percent) answered that they “didn’t know” whether their union had fought for COVID-19 protections.

A teacher in Tennessee stated, “TEA/NEA have done nothing for teachers since the beginning of the pandemic. Nothing. When I moved districts to work online, I did not join a teacher’s union again. I’m vulnerable if I get sued, but other than that, since inflation has gone up, I’m glad for the extra money I would have paid in dues.”

A professor in California wrote, “There are 4 unions on my campus. They advocated back to work in person and in January no masks and no vaccine requirements.”

The ongoing staffing and budget crisis in public education

For decades, public schools have been under a bipartisan attack through budget cuts, layoffs, school closures, and punitive funding models such as Race to the Top designed to funnel public funding to charter schools and private edu-businesses. Even before the pandemic, teacher shortages had

become widespread across the US following years of layoffs after the 2008-2009 financial crisis and dropping rates of enrollment into teacher education programs.

The pandemic has exacerbated both of these crises, and major districts across the US are facing enormous budget cuts, including New York City where nearly \$400 million in school funding is being slashed. The current teacher and staff shortage is estimated to be around 300,000 personnel.

Asked about the staffing crisis, 90 percent responded that it continues to impact their schools. Teachers reported that their workloads and class sizes have increased, there are no substitutes available, and that the whole school system is affected including transportation, food and janitorial services and administration.

A teacher from New York City noted, “Staff shortages impact every facet of the school day, and if there is no substitute teacher when a full time teacher is out sick, for example, classes have to be combined and/or students are made to sit in the auditorium so they can be ‘supervised’ on a mass scale by a few paraprofessionals or teachers aides. It’s completely NOT conducive to learning or students’ well-being. They are behind in almost every subject area and don’t like coming to school, often.”

Another teacher from Tennessee reported, “We saw a tremendous exodus of personnel last year. We are a small district and we easily lost 1/3 of staff. That trend continued this year. We have courses at the in person schools with no teacher.”

The social and economic impact of the pandemic

The final part of our survey asked about the social, economic and emotional toll that the pandemic has had upon teachers, students and their families. The responses attest to a devastating social crisis that has resulted from the ruling class’s criminal response to the pandemic. In addition to the immediate consequences of mass infection, entire lives have been upended and forever changed by the death of loved ones, the loss of income, and the disabling effects of Long COVID.

A teacher commented that “Many students have at least one family member who seem to be suffering symptoms of long-COVID. Lots of anecdotal ‘My aunt can’t work any more because she’s sick,’ or ‘My husband got laid off because he got COVID and couldn’t go to work for a week’ types of comments. One student’s parent has been hospitalized twice this school year already; not sure what’s going on with them, but it’s negatively impacting every aspect of that student’s life, and the lives of their siblings, daily.”

Multiple teachers reported that students who had lost parents to COVID-19 had to take on part-time jobs to support their families. “I know homeless faculty who have PhD’s. I know homeless students. I know a student whose parents died (she is 15). She is working two jobs, going to school, and trying to keep her two siblings out of foster care,” said one teacher.

Teachers reported that students faced issues such as food and housing insecurity, ongoing anxiety about contracting COVID-19, and the profound impact of losing their loved ones. As one teacher succinctly stated, children are burdened with “too much stress for such young minds.”

Conclusions

The survey shows that the entire political establishment, including the

Democrats, the Republicans, the CDC (whose guidance has been used to justify the abandonment of mitigation measures), and the pro-capitalist trade unions, have all participated in an historic assault on the lives and well-being of the population.

Since its founding in 2020, the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee US (ERFSC) has fought to mobilize educators to demand that every public health tool be rigorously applied to stop the pandemic. The ERFSC has insisted from the start that no genuine or progressive opposition to the official pandemic response exists within the political establishment.

Only by building an independent mass movement, armed with a scientific understanding of the pandemic and combined with class consciousness about its own revolutionary capacity, can the working class put an end to the pandemic, as well as the attacks against public education.

As we approach the fourth year of the pandemic, this task is as urgent as ever.



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