

As new school year opens, COVID-19 surge forces abrupt classroom closures in the US

Nancy Hanover
15 August 2024

In the opening days of the 2024-25 school year, at least two schools were forced to shut down due to SARS-CoV-2 outbreaks. This is only the tip of the iceberg, as 1.3 million Americans are currently being infected daily, and most US schools have yet to reopen. For instance, in New York, Michigan and many other northern states, districts typically start after Labor Day.

On Monday, August 12, Jefferson-Abernathy-Graetz (JAG) High School in Montgomery, Alabama closed, moving to remote learning. Fifteen educators reported COVID-19 infection after last week's two-day orientation. Officials said they would reassess the situation and possibly reopen the building by Friday, at which point they said masks and disinfectant wipes would be made available to students.

The same day as the Alabama closure, Humboldt schools in western Tennessee called off classes at Stigall Primary. Officials informed parents by letter that the school would be closed for "sanitizing" due to an "uptick in COVID." A later report said an undisclosed number of students and staff tested positive for COVID-19, while others were symptomatic.

"Everyone's like, 'COVID is back, COVID is back'," said Jessica Williamson, a parent of a first grader at Stigall. "I just feel like it didn't really go anywhere," she told local media. "Those are little kids. They're the most prone to put things in their mouths, to touch each other, to just share germs," Williamson said.

Why, indeed, is "COVID back"? The response of the Tennessee school to the outbreak provides a partial answer.

The district said it was carrying out a "deep clean, disinfecting every surface," according to Ginger Carver, the communications director for the school district. She added that teachers and staff would follow protocols to keep the classrooms and common areas disinfected. "When students move from class to class, teachers will be wiping down the desks, the desktop surfaces. They'll be using disinfectants. Basically, the protocols that we were doing back when COVID was full blown," she said. Humboldt schools reopened on Wednesday.

In other words, COVID is returning with the new school year because no action is being taken to combat the main cause of COVID transmission, the aerosolization of the virus. Furthermore, schools are being reopened almost immediately despite high community spread.

As scientists have demonstrated and nearly five years of COVID deaths have underscored, the key to fighting COVID is disinfection of the air. Without the use of HEPA filtration in all indoor spaces and other mechanisms, including Far-UV light, schools will dramatically exacerbate the spread of the disease. Despite the use of these methodologies by the ruling elites to protect themselves—at the Davos Economic Summit or at the White House, for instance—no such measures are in place for millions of schoolchildren.

The Biden administration, with the full support of the Republican Party, has deprived schools of the funds necessary to make schools safe and prioritized spending for war. The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds allocated to schools beginning in 2020 were purportedly aimed at counteracting COVID. However, they fell far short of addressing the urgently required but costly upgrading of air quality in schools. ESSER amounted to a financial band-aid to districts reeling from decades of budget cuts and inflation.

A House of Representatives study prior to COVID showed that US school buildings were so antiquated and dangerously unsafe that outlays of \$145 billion per year were required to modernize and maintain them. The costs of air disinfection would no doubt significantly increase that figure. For its part, the Biden/Harris administration allowed ESSER to end while funneling more than \$1 trillion into its rapidly expanding wars against Russia in Ukraine and its military build-up against Iran and China.

Death and disease have been normalized, while mitigation measures as important and effective as masking have been demonized by the right wing among both Republicans and Democrats. This is another reason COVID is back to greet returning students.

An important new study in *The Lancet* has shown the critical importance of face coverings to prevent transmission in indoor spaces. As Bill Shaw reported on the WSWS:

Face coverings dramatically reduce the load of SARS-CoV-2 in exhaled breath from infected persons. The reductions reached as high as 98 percent, with variations according to the type of face covering worn.

Despite this clear research, neither these schools nor others will require masking when they reopen, spurring new outbreaks of COVID.

Reacting to the new school-related outbreaks, healthcare expert and data analyst Greg Travis posted on X/Twitter Wednesday, "FYI since 2020 more children have died of their SARS-CoV-2 infections ... than from all other infectious pathogens COMBINED Stop pretending that SARS-CoV-2 spreading in schools is only a problem for parents, teachers, bus drivers, etc. It is killing kids."

It is killing and disabling parents, staff and family members as well. JAG High School in Montgomery was the workplace of beloved school custodian Morris Pitts, who died of COVID on November 29, 2020. Pitts was one of eight educators from Montgomery whose lives

were taken over a matter of weeks. State, local and federal government officials turned a blind eye to the rampaging virus to keep students in school and parents at work.

The criminal “let it rip” policy of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Biden’s ending of the Public Health Emergency in May 2023 has left the working class abandoned to the ravages of the disease and the growth of Long COVID.

In that vein, Montgomery parents were also instructed—in the most milquetoast language—that when their children develop symptoms, “it’s best to keep them at home.”

Education unions, including the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), have said nothing about the inevitable superspread resulting from the beginning of a new school year in the midst of a record summer surge. As their websites testify, the AFT and NEA are instead hyperfocused on getting out the vote for Harris/Walz in November in order to maintain their lucrative role as labor contractors and government partners.

Clare, a member of the Alabama Educators Rank and File Committee who protested the unsafe conditions in schools on the Montgomery County Court House steps in October 2020, denounced the failure of schools and health authorities to protect children. She noted that she is herself currently recovering from the virus and had been told by a Veterans Administration nurse, “Just treat the symptoms.” She angrily related that the nurse “had the nerve to say the common cold is just a variation of coronavirus, an extract of COVID. She refused to test me, telling me people are not dying as before and that I’d be alright. They denied me a test. I think they just don’t want to pay for tests anymore.”

Referring to the Montgomery educators who formed “No Plan, No Personnel” and then the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Committee, Clare said, “This was the problem from the beginning, they have no plan. They should know we might have to go remote at any time because nothing has been done to make the schools safe.”

Clare said a recent family funeral resulted in at least eight members of her family contracting COVID in the summer surge. Bitterly refuting the claims that the virus has mutated to a mild, non-threatening disease, she said, “I felt like I was dying, I never felt like this before. On my third day, it was not a headache—it felt like a migraine. I had body aches from my head through my spine to my feet. I couldn’t breathe and was nauseous. It’s been two and a half weeks now, and I’m fatigued from just doing simple things. It’s debilitating. I get so tired I can’t even pick up the phone.”

While these two schools have been forced to close, right-wing administrators around the country are vowing to keep schools running no matter the cost. On July 31, Arizona State Superintendent of Education Tom Horne told ABC News that despite the surge across his state, “If anybody talks about closing school, I will fight it as hard as I can.” He added, “Closing of the schools that occurred last time was an unbelievable disaster.” His contemptuous disdain for the health of students and their communities was buttressed by his referencing of the CDC’s prescription to treat COVID “like a common respiratory virus.”

While the fascist right is pushing for prohibitions on school closures and outright anti-vaccination policies, the dismantling of the public health system has been bipartisan. It began with Trump but was then spearheaded by the Biden administration. Both ruling class parties insist that workers should report to work, whether or not they are sick. Under the Biden/Harris administration over 800,000 Americans died from COVID, while millions more suffered debilitating Long COVID,

for which the long-term generational impacts of annual reinfections will not be fully grasped for years or decades to come.

The two schools in Tennessee and Alabama are the only sites currently reporting outbreaks, but this has more to do with lack of media coverage than lack of COVID. For instance, in a San Diego high school, the administration sent a cart around with free COVID tests (although well past their 2022 expiration dates).

Another reason for the return of COVID arises from the years of right-wing disinformation campaigns to spread confusion and conspiracy theories within the population, cultivating the most backward and fascistic conceptions. This has resulted in a terrible decline of vaccination rates for all preventable diseases, not just COVID, which will continue to worsen the impact. The share of kindergarten children with a vaccine exemption has increased in 36 states since the pandemic began. Twenty-one states have banned student COVID-19 vaccine mandates, both Republican- and Democratic-dominated states, including Michigan, Ohio, and New Hampshire.

WSWS writer Benjamin Mateus reported on the declining rates of vaccination:

As of May 11, 2024, only 22.5 percent of adults have received an updated COVID vaccine since September 14, 2023. However, for children six months of age through 17, that figure is a deplorable 14.4 percent.

He noted the social impact of these abysmal numbers:

Including the complete abandonment of all mitigation measures, the ongoing surge of infections is being driven by the waning immunity in the population.

The pandemic has revealed the contempt of the ruling elites and both of their political parties, Democrats and Republicans, for the working class. It has exposed the role of the pro-capitalist AFT and NEA, which continue to insist educators work in an unsafe environment and children breathe unsafe air.

Every day, countless people continue to die or be sickened needlessly while mankind has the capacity to end this and future pandemics. The working class must end “Forever COVID” by ending “Forever Capitalism,” taking health and safety into its own hands, and ending the subordination of social life to private profit. Join or build an independent rank-and-file committee at your school or workplace today.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact