

Over half of all US teachers consider leaving the profession due to pandemic-related stressors

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More than half of all teachers in the United States, or 55 percent, plan to leave education sooner than expected due to major stressors caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a survey conducted in late January by GBAO Strategies on behalf of the National Education Association (NEA).

Teachers identified concerns over COVID-19 and lack of safety protocols at their schools as the primary reasons behind their desire to leave their jobs. Only 38 percent of teachers said their schools had improved ventilation during the pandemic, and just 28 percent said they felt their school's ventilation systems provided enough protection to help lower transmission.

Highlighting the immense levels of stress and disillusionment teachers now experience, 90 percent of those surveyed said that burnout is a serious problem, and 91 percent said pandemic-related stress is a serious problem.

The percentage of teachers compelled to leave the profession sooner than expected has steadily risen throughout the pandemic. A RAND corporation study found that in January and February 2021, one in four teachers said they were likely to leave, whereas previously one in six teachers were likely to leave. In August 2021, a separate NEA poll found that 37 percent of teachers expected to leave the profession early.

Contrary to the lies promoted by the Biden administration and corporate media that the pandemic is over, that schools are the safest places for children and that the population can now return to normalcy, the opposite is the case. The criminal response by the ruling elite to the pandemic has completely transformed society, inflicting lasting trauma on the population due to ongoing mass death, infection and disability. The decades-long attack on public institutions such as healthcare and education has been qualitatively deepened during the pandemic.

The official death toll in the US has now surpassed 900,000 deaths. According to Worldometer, an average of 2,500 Americans are dying every day from COVID-19, with deaths continuing to rise. Efforts to keep open the schools, no matter the human cost, have resulted in an explosion of new cases among children. In January alone, more than 3.5 million official child cases were recorded. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), at least 1,239 children have died since the start of the pandemic in the US, with 144 of those deaths recorded in the past three weeks alone.

More than 200,000 children in the US have lost a parent or caregiver during the pandemic. In-person instruction in schools, amid the present surge of the Omicron variant and lack of safety mitigation measures, has placed ongoing stress on children who not only worry about themselves, their peers and their teachers getting sick, but also that they might unwittingly infect their loved ones.

In addition to the increasing percentage of teachers wanting to leave the profession early, a mass exodus of teachers has already taken place over the past two years. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data as of February 1 shows that there are presently 567,000 fewer educators in public schools in the US than there were before the pandemic, more than doubling the government's 10-year projections. Prior to the pandemic, BLS predicted that an estimated 270,000 public school teachers would leave the profession during the 10 years from 2016 to 2026.

Since the start of the spring semester in January, K-12 districts across the country have reported mass staffing shortages due to employees being sick from COVID-19, exacerbating an already crisis situation in the schools. According to Burbio's School Closings Tracker, at least 20,725 schools have closed temporarily as of January 3, many due to severe staffing shortages.

Viewing the staffing crisis as an economic setback rather than a public health emergency, the Biden administration has doubled down on its homicidal policy of mass infection by ensuring schools and businesses remain open.

With dozens of states recently ending contact-tracing requirements, school districts across the US are now being encouraged to stop individual contact-tracing efforts. CDC K-12 COVID-19 safety guidelines reflect the entirely unscientific reduction in quarantine and isolation times from 10 to 5 days for both staff and students. Now, infected students and staff can return to classrooms as long as their symptoms are "improving" or they remain asymptomatic.

Teachers and students are increasingly conscious that they are being sacrificed, or at least neglected, in the interests of profits. In opposition to open mass infection policies in the schools, a revolt by students and educators against in-person instruction has erupted across the country and internationally. Thousands of students and teachers have expressed opposition through walkouts, sickouts and strikes in multiple cities throughout the US, Canada, Greece,

Austria, France and elsewhere.

In addition to temporary school closures and the implementation of wholly unscientific CDC guidelines to keep schools open, further reactionary and desperate measures have been taken by school districts, as well as state and local governments, to keep schools open.

Districts experiencing bus driver shortages have resorted to calling on teachers and other school staff to drive buses while others are giving stipends to parents to drive kids to school or call Uber. Some districts have utilized charter bus companies at great expense. Massachusetts even deployed the National Guard to drive school buses. Many drivers launched wildcat strikes without union sanction across the US in response to unbearable working conditions and paltry pay.

Various police-state measures have also been used to keep schools open. Oklahoma recently allowed unmasked and armed police officers to substitute in classrooms. Arizona has enlisted the National Guard to fill in for sick teachers. In Broward County, Florida, security forces were used to block exits in the schools to prevent students from engaging in a district-wide walkout, protesting unsafe conditions in the schools.

One district in St. Louis, Missouri, is using the students themselves to deal with the staffing shortage. In December, the Northwest District hired 20 students part-time to fill nine open positions in maintenance, food service and child care. One child worker, 15, was paid below Missouri's minimum wage, prompting anger from community members, with one commenting on the Facebook advertisement for the job fair, "It is slave labor."

In Michigan, where schools are the number one source of COVID-19 cases, Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer signed a bipartisan bill effectively providing a legal mechanism to keep children in school even without teachers by decreasing requirements for substitute teaching from 60 college credit hours to just having a high school diploma. Missouri, Oregon, Illinois, Colorado, Hawaii and other states have similarly decreased substitute requirements.

In Arizona, mirroring the rest of the country, teachers are being forced to cover classes, many with subjects different from their specialization, while losing time otherwise spent on already immense workloads. One Arizona teacher tweeted, "I have covered classes 24 times. There were 62 school days in this time period. I have lost 39% of my planning/grading/collaboration time because we cannot find substitutes." Many replied to the Tweet detailing similar circumstance. Support staff and administrators across the state are also being forced to cover classrooms as a result of acute shortages.

The mass exodus of educators and the reactionary measures taken by schools to ensure classes stay open exposes the fraudulent claims by the Biden administration, unions and the corporate media that the reopening of schools has to do with concerns over children's welfare, mental health and "learning loss."

As Omicron cases continue to surge, the teachers unions have played a despicable role in suppressing the opposition of teachers and reopening the schools. American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten, recently noting that over 98 percent of schools are now open as opposed to 45 percent last

winter, said, "That shows remarkable strength and courage and fortitude on behalf of teachers and paraprofessionals."

The staggering conditions facing teachers and students in K-12 schools point to an entire breakdown of public education under the weight of the pandemic. Public education, a longstanding institution of American democracy and society, has been under bipartisan attack for decades. The ruling elite sees the present situation as an opportunity to deepen the assault, further cut funding for public schools and promote school privatization.

Recently, Arizona's Republican Governor Doug Ducey has allowed families to sign up for school vouchers if their schools pause in-person learning. Other proponents of school privatization, such as former US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and Alabama state senator Del Marsh, are actively promoting legislation to implement school choice and voucher programs, which would undermine public education in favor of privately-run charter schools.

Federal funding provided for schools through Biden's American Rescue Plan Act is entirely insufficient to make up for the loss of funding at the start of the pandemic and due to declines in enrollment. Major districts across the country are beginning to see drastic budget deficits lead to further cuts to programs and jobs. Oakland Unified School District in California confronts a \$90 million budget deficit, with officials pursuing draconian cuts that include the shuttering of a dozen schools, cutting vital programs and mass layoffs.

Against the profit interests of the financial oligarchy and independent of both capitalist political parties and the unions, educators and students must unite with workers and youth internationally and take up a fight for a globally coordinated strategy to eliminate COVID-19 and put an end to the pandemic. The WSWS urges educators to sign up to join and build rank-and-file committees throughout the US and internationally to fight to save lives and guarantee universal access to free, high quality education.



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