

No masks, crowded hallways

Georgia highschoolers use social media to expose disastrous conditions as schools reopen

By Genevieve Leigh
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In a courageous expression of the massive opposition to the rush to reopen schools, students at North Paulding High School outside of Atlanta, Georgia, used social media to expose the disastrous conditions at their school.

The disturbing viral photos and videos reveal hallways packed with crowds of students not wearing masks during the first few days of in-person classes, scenes that undoubtedly represent schools across the US.

School administrators responded to the exposure with hostility. Two of the students involved were suspended, including 15-year-old Hannah, who told *Buzzfeed* that she was found to have violated rules against unauthorized use of smartphones in school hallways. The school principal can also be heard in this leaked audio file threatening anyone else with “consequences” if they post anything “negative” on social media.

After the posts went viral on social media and the school was made the focus of nationwide negative attention, the students were reinstated. But the fight against the deadly reopening of schools and workplaces in Georgia and across the country is still just beginning.

Outbreaks already reported

Like districts throughout the country, under immense pressure from Washington, Paulding County Schools rushed to reopen “as usual” despite reports of positive coronavirus cases among students and staff.

Outbreaks were reported among members of North Paulding High School football team, many of whom, one Facebook video shows, worked out together in a crowded indoor gym the week prior to opening. Parents were notified of the outbreak just hours before the start of the first day of classes.

In addition to the student cases, multiple teachers at North Paulding reported positive tests among school staff prior to the first day of school. One infected staff member told *Buzzfeed News* that she came into contact with “most teachers at the school” during a staff event the week prior to opening. Teachers and staff are reporting that the school is refusing to confirm coronavirus infections among district employees.

A leaked “Open Records Act” request from a local parent suggests that North Paulding High School alone had 23 confirmed cases before August 5th.

Now, the situation in Paulding County threatens to quickly spiral out of control.

A crisis by design

Since the events at North Paulding have gone viral, various representatives of the school and the County Board of Education have made pathetic attempts at damage control, attempting to paint the situation as simply a “misunderstanding.” The principal of the school sent a note to parents indicating that the photos could be explained if they were given “context.”

What context could possibly explain crowds of children packed into school hallways and classrooms like sardines without any protection in the midst of a pandemic that is raging out of control?

The fact of the matter is that the Paulding County Board of Education has been fully supportive of the bipartisan homicidal drive to reopen schools. Like counties throughout the country, it has made no serious attempt to protect its students and staff. In fact, a video released on social media of a county education board meeting held just prior to the school reopenings, the chair of the Paulding County Board of Education, Jeff Fuller, can be heard calling the CDC guidelines “complete crap.”

He goes on: “I would like to see Paulding County lead the way in an absolute normal return to school on August 3rd.” Fuller suggests that children are immune from the virus saying that it is “not fair to kids to shove something down their throats that’s not affecting them.” He ends his remarks by urging his colleagues to not “buy into the hype” around the pandemic.

Just as the images posted by Hannah and others were going viral on social media, Jeff Fuller posted the following message on Facebook: “Paulding County has had three great days of in Person school with virtually no issues. Please go find something else to do, besides consume yourself with this photo. I am starting to think some who continue to dwell on this may need serious mental help?”

The post has since been deleted.

The situation in Paulding County, tragically, is far from unique. Reports of similar situations are beginning to flood social media. On Friday, photos taken by students at Woodstock High School in Cherokee, County, Georgia showed even more disturbing scenes of hundreds of students crammed together in hallways during a fire drill.

A teacher who works in a West Texas School district penned an anonymous letter posted to Twitter Friday explaining that several teachers attempted to make homemade PPE and dividers for their classrooms. The teachers, however, were told that they could not do this by their school district.

The fact of the matter is that teachers and students are being sent into incredibly dangerous situations in their schools. Scientific evidence proving massive potential for spread among children is

being suppressed or ignored by state, local, and federal officials. And, as the situation in Georgia reveals, those who speak out against the official narrative are being threatened with suspension, or in cases of teachers, termination.

Debunking the myth that children are “unaffected”

It must be stated clearly and in no uncertain terms that the claim that young people are “unaffected” by the virus is a blatant lie. Those who make such claims are either grossly misinformed or consciously operating on behalf of the political establishment who understand that such information will hinder the drive to reopen the economy.

Students, teachers and parents must arm themselves with the most reliable and recent scientific data in order to wage a fight in opposition to a reckless reopening of schools.

There is an expanding body of scientific research showing the centrality of keeping schools closed as part of any plan to contain the pandemic. Furthermore, recent data is showing a drastic surge of infections among small children and adolescents throughout the course of the pandemic:

- A new CDC report released Friday looked at nearly 580 kids who were hospitalized with the coronavirus between the start of March and late July. Researchers found that hospitalization rates for children increased steadily over that timeline. About 1 in 3 hospitalized children needed to be admitted to an intensive care unit, according to the report—a rate similar to the ICU admittance rate for hospitalized adults with the coronavirus.

- A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA), published late July concluded that the widespread closure of schools in mid-March saved at least 40,600 lives over a 16-day period and resulted in an estimated 1.37 million fewer infections over a 26-day period in the spring. Those states that closed earliest saw the largest relative reductions in infections and deaths.

- Another JAMA study released recently found that babies and young children infected with COVID-19 can carry high viral loads in their throats and airways—up to 100 times the amount of adults. The study noted, “Behavioral habits of young children and close quarters in school and daycare settings raise concern for SARS-CoV-2 amplification in this population as public health restrictions are eased.”

- The American Academy of Pediatrics and the Children’s Hospital Association released a report Monday documenting an extensive compilation of data from states on child COVID-19 cases. They found that while children represented only 8.8 percent of all cases in states reporting cases by age, over 338,982 have tested positive for COVID-19 since the onset of the pandemic.

- The same report noted that the overall rate for COVID-19 among children is 447 cases per 100,000 in the population. Moreover, 97,078 new child cases were reported from July 16 to July 30, *a staggering 40 percent increase from the previous period.*

If schools are allowed to reopen under the current conditions students will get sick and die, teachers will get sick and die, and parents will get sick and die. This dire reality is already finding tragic expression in states through the US.

Just last week two teenagers in Florida—a 16-year-old female from Miami-Dade County and a 17-year-old male from Manatee County—were added to Florida’s COVID-19 death toll.

In fact, just as the crisis at North Paulding High School was unfolding, Georgia reported its youngest death from COVID-19 yet—a

7-year-old boy from the Savannah area who died on Thursday. News of the child’s death comes the same day Georgia surpassed 4,000 confirmed coronavirus deaths since the start of the pandemic. The Georgia Department of Public Health said the boy, who lived in Chatham County, had no reported chronic conditions.

The push to reopen schools: a class policy

The demand that schools reopen is central to the ruling class campaign to force workers back to work in order to pump out profits for the corporate-financial elite.

While the Trump administration has spearheaded this campaign, the Democrats bear equal responsibility. This fact was underscored on Friday as the Democrat-controlled state of New York announced that schools would be allowed to reopen.

If an opposition is going to be mounted to the back-to-school campaign it will not come from the Democrats, but rather from the teachers in alliance with students, parents, and broad sections of the working class.

Teachers and young people: united in struggle

There is every indication that teachers and students are eager to fight for their lives and the lives of their friends and family. The experience at North Paulding High School is instructive for this struggle. The news of the student’s suspension sparked a massive backlash from fellow students, teachers, and parents who took to social media to demand that Hannah and the other student be reinstated.

The fight for socialist leadership in the working class

The Socialist Equality Party and its youth and student wing, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality have issued the call for educators, parents and students to form independent rank-and-file safety committees to unite across district and state lines and prepare for a nationwide strike to halt the drive to reopen the schools.

The establishment of a network of independent rank-and-file committees in schools and neighborhoods will become a powerful means through which the working class can advance its struggle in defense of public health, public education, and democratic rights.

If you are a teacher, educator or parent we urge you to contact us today to find out how to join such a committee or start one in your area. If you are a student or youth, join our youth and student movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>