

Florida orders schools to reopen as COVID-19 cases surge

David Brown
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On Monday, the Florida Department of Education issued an emergency order requiring school districts to reopen all “brick and mortar schools at least five days per week for all students” in August in order to facilitate “a return to Florida hitting its full economic stride.” The order, which specifically complains that school closures “limit many parents and guardians from returning to work,” is part of the murderous back-to-work campaign that has led to a spike in COVID-19 cases across Florida and dozens of other states.

The number of new cases in Florida has surged from an average of 700 each day at the beginning of June to a seven-day moving average of 8,587 daily cases on July 6. With the number of cases continuing to escalate, it is certain that COVID-19 will be present throughout the school system next month and face-to-face instruction would become a significant vector for further transmission. Teachers, including those nearing retirement or with health vulnerabilities, will almost certainly contract the deadly disease, while countless students will bring it home to their parents and grandparents.

The order immediately sparked outrage and protests from teachers and parents across the state. Teachers in Orange County, which includes Orlando, organized a protest caravan that blocked traffic. On Facebook, an Orange County teacher, Mia, wrote: “We the People...We can’t let the Governor and the head of the DOE make these decisions without the input of the Teachers. We’re the ones risking our lives. We need to make our voices heard and stand together. This is literally life and death.” A parent, Angela, added, “I’m a Mom and at risk due to an autoimmune issue...why for political reasons am I being forced to expose my child, her teachers, our families and communities to a virus that is not under control. Hell No! We won’t go!”

The Florida order comes as part of a nationwide push to end lockdown measures, “reopen” the economy and force

workers into unsafe conditions. The same day as the Florida order, Trump tweeted “SCHOOLS MUST OPEN IN THE FALL!!!” On Tuesday, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos said in a call of governors, “Ultimately, it’s not a matter of if schools need to open, it’s a matter of how. School must reopen, they must be fully operational.”

Schools across the country, in many cases under pressure from teachers and parents, shut down in-person instruction in March in order to slow the spread of the pandemic. School districts have struggled to come up with any effective plans to reopen schools under conditions where state and federal governments have rejected efforts to contain the virus and pursued a policy of mass infection. During the nearly four months since Florida schools were closed—when there were only 217 confirmed cases acknowledged in the state—no effective measures were implemented to contain or mitigate the disease, such as contact tracing. Now that there are 1,000 times as many confirmed cases in the state, they are trying to open up schools.

In early May, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis rushed to reopen the economy even as his administration was deliberately undercounting the number of COVID-19 deaths and infections. This included firing a state employee in charge of Florida’s coronavirus database after she refused to manipulate the data to justify the governor’s back-to-work order.

The Trump administration and Governor DeSantis are so adamant about getting children physically into school regardless of health cost or educational value, because they need schools as day care centers in order to push parents back to work. Safer, more effective distance learning would require that families take care of children during the day.

The conditions of schools make it effectively impossible to safely have in-person instruction when there is community transmission. Outside of prisons and

meatpacking and other industrial facilities there are few environments that squeeze people into such close contact throughout the day as a school. Underfunded districts cram over 30 students into classrooms, making any pretense of social distancing absurd. A high school English or math classroom can easily have over 100 students cycle through during the day. Cafeterias and playgrounds see almost continuous use and cannot be feasibly cleaned between classes.

Proposed measures to minimize transmission at schools are either unworkable or undercut the academic advantages of in-person instruction. Mandatory masks, as proposed in Lake County, cannot prevent transmission in an environment where children eat and play. Daily temperature checks, as suggested in Orange, Osceola and Polk Counties, won't catch pre-symptomatic students.

Many districts in Florida and across the country have proposed a complicated hybrid model of online teaching with occasional weekly face-to-face instruction to minimize student time on campus. Every proposal made runs into hard limits stemming from decades of underfunding the public education system. There are not enough teachers to adapt and implement the curriculum to small, socially distanced classrooms. There are not enough facilities to handle the student body. There are not enough janitors and facilities staff to disinfect facilities.

In January, thousands of teachers rallied for more funding at the state capital in Tallahassee. Per student funding in Florida has dropped when adjusted for inflation by \$1,000 since the 2008 economic crisis. The recently passed state budget only makes the deficit worse. DeSantis has repeatedly stated that school districts have plenty of money and praised the insulting \$40 rise in per student funding in this year's budget. The very same budget has shifted \$233 in pension costs from the state to the districts and cut \$134.6 million in school recognition funds (rewards for meeting "student performance" targets). Adding it all together makes a net cut of \$90 per student.

The Florida order cynically claims that schools must reopen because the "nutrition, socialization, counseling, and extra-curricular activities" they provide "are critical to the well-being of students and families." The politicians, having created a health and social crisis, are now insisting that teachers risk their lives and those of their students to address these massive social problems, and to do so with a smaller budget!

The resources exist in society, not just to contain the pandemic but also to revitalize public education. When

the pandemic initially sent the stock market into a tailspin, the CARES Act was passed with overwhelming bipartisan support to funnel trillions of dollars into the banks and corporations to prop up the stock market. The program worked and US billionaires increased their wealth by \$584 billion, up 19 percent, since the market hit its low point near the beginning of the pandemic. At the same time millions of workers lost their jobs and states across the country are facing a \$230 billion public education budget shortfall.

Before the pandemic, more than 700,000 teachers and other educators in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Los Angeles, Oakland, Chicago and other locations engaged in strikes and mass protests over austerity and inequality in 2018-19. Many of the struggles were launched in opposition to the unions, which have colluded with the Democrats and Republicans in decades of budget cutting and school privatization. These initial battles, however, were betrayed by the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which blocked a nationwide strike by educators and accepted the austerity demands by the Democrats and Republicans.

The growth of opposition and the political radicalization of teachers expressed in these struggles, however, will only intensify as the corporate-controlled parties try to force educators back into unsafe classrooms and accept massive austerity measures after handing trillions to Wall Street.

To oppose the rush to reopen the schools, teachers need new organizations of struggle, which are independent of the NEA and AFT. Educators should follow the lead of autoworkers in Michigan, who have formed rank-and-file safety committees to oversee the health and safety of workers and shutdown production when working conditions are not safe. This must be combined with a political struggle against Trump, Biden and all the capitalist politicians, and for a socialist program, including a radical redistribution of wealth to meet society's needs.



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