

With pandemic raging, Florida governor deepens drive to reopen schools

Alex Johnson
17 August 2020

Florida state officials are pressing ahead with the reckless and premature reopening of public schools. As the state approaches 9,300 deaths from COVID-19 and daily infections have again risen above 5,000, politicians are insisting that millions of children be herded back to schools, endangering the lives of themselves, countless teachers and millions of families.

Florida's Republican Governor Ron DeSantis is a well-known acolyte of Trump and one of the most vocal proponents for the president's back-to-work and school reopening campaigns. He has consistently claimed that the supposed "educational benefits" of in-person learning outweigh health concerns, prompting the Department of Education to issue an emergency order last month requiring brick-and-mortar schools to open by Aug. 31.

Despite pushback and massive hostility from teachers towards the back-to-school drive, the political establishment, backed by the unions, school boards, and county judges, have been relentless in pursuing this homicidal policy and have even resorted to intimidation and threats to force the school districts to open up classrooms for in-person schooling.

This has found its sharpest expression in Hillsborough County, the eighth-largest school district in the country and third-largest in Florida. DeSantis and Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran traveled to the county last Monday to demand that the district drop plans to hold fully online classes for its 223,300 students for the first four weeks of the school year, threatening to strip the county of nearly \$200 million in funding.

Hillsborough immediately revised its plan after being issued the ultimatum. Instead, the county now plans to do just one week of online schooling starting August 24, and then transition to a hybrid style of physical and remote learning on August 31.

Hillsborough County Superintendent Addison Davis stated in a Thursday press conference that the policy reversal was necessary, saying, "It was very clear, if we do not follow their emergency order, we will be financially hindered,"

adding, "That would bankrupt us. It would put us in a terrible financial situation."

Hillsborough reported a 13 percent COVID-19 positivity rate on Monday, the fifth highest in the state. Of the 68 deaths from COVID-19 in the greater Tampa Bay region last Tuesday, 31 were in Hillsborough County.

At a roundtable held last week at Winthrop College Prep Academy in Riverview, Florida, DeSantis told the attendees that the option between remote learning and in-person education is non-negotiable in the state, saying, "Some of this stuff is just not debatable anymore." This echoed the statements of Commissioner Corcoran, who openly rejected the county's original plan to close schools due to the warnings issued by local doctors on the danger of an explosive surge of the virus in the region if schools reopened.

In a speech last Wednesday, DeSantis menacingly compared resuming classroom learning for small children to a "mission" similar to a "Navy Seal operation," such as the 2011 assassination of Osama Bin Laden. That very same day, nine students at SeaWind Elementary School were sent home to quarantine for 14 days after one student exhibited COVID-19 symptoms, merely one day after the school district reopened for in-person learning.

In addition to in-person learning, DeSantis and state officials have also demanded that schools sanction sporting activities for the entire fall season. Last month, the state's high school athletic board voted 11-5 in favor of letting high school football teams start practicing on August 24, against the advice of its medical advisory committee.

Widespread anger is brewing among educators in Florida and around the country against the murderous back-to-school drive and the callous indifference shown by state officials. Nearly a dozen Facebook groups have sprung up in Florida alone, serving as forums to express discontent and share experiences.

In the group "Fight for Florida Public Schools," one teacher exposed the governor's lie that all teachers with underlying health conditions were being approved to teach

virtually.

“This is simply not true,” she said. “There are not enough virtual positions for all the teachers that qualify. Many school districts are requiring teachers to use the virtual model from the brick and mortar setting, something that still increases risks to teachers with underlying health conditions. Teachers are being forced to make life or death decisions. Those that must not be in a face-to-face classroom but cannot teach virtually due to the shortage, have to take FMLA to leave, medical leave, or resign/retire.”

In a group post, she commented on the cruel and fraudulent “choice” being presented to parents to either risk infection by sending their children to school or keep them home and face starvation from not working. She wrote, “During the pandemic, many parents are sending their kids to school because they cannot afford to stop working. In order for families to stay home, they need financial support.”

DeSantis has been among the most aggressive in the promotion of anti-scientific and cynical arguments to justify reopening schools, stating last week, “Nothing’s risk-free in life. There’s nothing we can do that’s going to be zero. But the risks are, what I would say low for the students, the risk of the schools being real drivers of the epidemic, certainly that’s not been validated in the observed experience up to this point.”

The claim that the risks are “low for the students” flies in the face of all the serious warnings that have come from physicians and infectious disease experts on the disastrous consequences of a vast school reopening. In late July, when asked whether she would suggest reopening schools in states such as Florida, Professor Dr. Tina Tan of Northwestern University said in a conference call hosted by the Infectious Disease Society of America, “The simple answer is no.”

Opposition to the campaign has also grown among doctors in Florida, with several physicians hosting a Zoom conference call in late July to raise the alarm over the immense lack of preparation for a full reopening. Citing recent surges of COVID-19 cases in Florida children, which have now grown to more than 38,000, they said schools could be a “dangerous super-spreader event for COVID-19.”

During the final eight days of July, there was a 34 percent increase in new cases among children in the state, according to a report released by the Florida Department of Health. Hospitalizations of Florida children jumped 23 percent from July 17 to July 24.

This coincided with the death of Kimora Lynum, a nine-year-old from Putnam County, who passed away from COVID-19 on July 17 after taking a nap. To date, she is the youngest person to fall victim to the virus in the state, and she had no pre-existing health conditions. Other youth fatalities include an 11-year-old boy from Miami-Dade

County and an 11-year-old girl from Broward County. Two teenagers also died in late July from the virus, bringing the total number of deaths among minors to nine.

Democratic state lawmakers and teachers seized on the comments from the governor last week to bash his reckless policy, while telling teachers that the only way a struggle can be mounted against the back-to-school drive is through a fruitless appeal to the court system. Last month, the Florida Education Association (FEA) filed a lawsuit against DeSantis and the Department of Education claiming that the school reopening order violates a constitutional requirement for safe schools.

On Friday, Circuit Judge Charles Dodson refused to dismiss the lawsuit, while making it clear that nothing should be inferred from this action. “I’m not, in any way, saying that the plaintiffs are going to be successful with their case,” Dodson said. “They still have the burden of proving their case.”

Teachers must not allow their struggle for safe working conditions to be channeled into the dead-end of lawsuits overseen by county judges, who will not hesitate to implement a decision that aligns closely with the big-business and profit interests of the DeSantis administration. Educators in Florida must organize themselves independently of the teacher unions, in rank-and-file safety committees.

The newly-formed Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will help guide this work, as part of an effort to build a network of rank-and-file committees in every school and neighborhood. The key task is to unite the broader working class and prepare for a general strike to halt the reopening of schools and the broader return-to-work campaign. All those who wish to take up such a struggle should contact us today, sign up for the WSWS Educators Newsletter, and make plans to attend the national call-in meeting this Saturday to discuss this perspective.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact