

“I don’t want to be a typhoid Mary!”

Jacksonville, Florida teacher speaks out against deadly school reopenings

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The crisis of reopening schools in Florida is deepening each day, with over 10,500 children testing positive for COVID-19 since August 10. Across the state, school districts are defying Republican Governor Ron DeSantis and the Florida Department of Health (FDOH) by publicly reporting COVID-19 cases, despite an order barring individual schools and districts from reporting. DeSantis has sought to justify this draconian order by claiming that K-12 testing data “needs to be put in the right context.”

Bay County officials are producing three COVID-19 reports every week after initially holding off reporting anything to their community. “We don’t want to get into any trouble, but we think transparency is the best way to go,” Superintendent Bill Husfelt stated earlier this week. Other schools are sharing information through message blasts and mass calls to parents.

DeSantis has followed in the footsteps of US President Donald Trump, downplaying and covering up the devastation being caused by COVID-19. At the end of August, he spoke at an educational event, stating, “These cases get spun as if they’re clinically significant. Could you imagine if we carpet-bombed every school, K through 12, for flu tests?”

This comment shows that DeSantis as well as other politicians and administrators throughout the nation are intentionally limiting the number of tests taken in their states, thereby lowering the number of positive cases reported and paving the way for more and more people to contract COVID-19 and die.

On Tuesday, data released by the FDOH indicated that 65 pediatric patients in Florida have been diagnosed with Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C), a rare but serious condition that

develops in some children who have tested positive for the virus that causes COVID-19. Florida is just one of nine states that has more than 30 cases of MIS-C, and there have been 792 cases reported nationwide.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has stated that it is unclear what causes MIS-C, but what is certain is that the condition leads to inflammation of parts of the body such as the heart, brain, and lungs. The CDC is encouraging those whose children have trouble breathing, have severe pain in the chest or abdomen, or cannot stay awake to seek emergency care.

A science teacher in Jacksonville, Florida spoke the WSWs about the spread of the coronavirus throughout the state just two weeks into the school year. She noted the pressure from the state government to reopen schools, the lack of clear safety policies, and the conditions faced by teachers and students.

“We already have five confirmed cases in my school,” she stated. “One of them is a paraprofessional going to school to become a teacher, and she is my friend. In fact, she was in my summer ‘bubble’ of just five people. I was in her home just a few days before she tested positive.

“But even though I was just with her, even in her house, when I went into school, the principal said a test wasn’t necessary. I was told I should ‘trust the system’ of contact tracing, etc.

“We are asked wellness questions every morning, but they are worded vaguely. Essentially they are telling teachers not to take a test unless they are symptomatic. I was told that if I decided to get a test, I would have to stay home and quarantine. So, you feel you are being punished for it.”

Denouncing the role of Florida state officials, she said, “We teachers at the school level are doing everything in our power, following all the rules, but the Governor [Ron DeSantis] is putting pressure on [Education Commissioner] Corcoran, and he’s threatening to withhold money from schools to force them to reopen. Our school board was split, but if they hadn’t been told they could lose \$70 million, they wouldn’t have opened.

“I’ve been so careful. I haven’t had a hug since March. If I just caught COVID within 15 days of school reopening, I am going to be really angry. I completely changed my life. I’m a hermit. I’m worried about my parents who live next door, both of whom have conditions, diabetes and recent heart surgery. I no longer can interact with them, except over a fence, and they are my only family.

“Our school is on a hybrid schedule to open, supposedly to allow for deep cleaning. One class is face to face, the next class is online. But we only get 50 minutes of planning, while dealing with multiple grades and different formats. We have two out of the three grades in school at the same time. But next Monday, the two grades will be in five days a week, and the following week everyone is full-time.

“As for cleaning, they sprayed some disinfectant throughout our school that is supposed to last 45 days. But now the only cleaning I see is what we teachers are doing. We are expected to clean in between classes.

“The reopening is really upsetting. There was not enough planning and not enough funding. It *is* a poor person’s disease. Being a teacher, I thought I’d be middle class or lower middle class. I’m not, I’m part of the working poor. The children we service are urban, mostly minority students, receiving free and reduced price lunches. Half of them are scared to death by the virus, the other half just act out.

“School has become like a prison. The children feel like prisoners, and we feel like prisoners. The desks have cardboard dividers between them with plastic. The kids can’t talk with their friends, can’t play football, and meanwhile the virus is spreading like wildfire in the school.

“We’re doing everything we’re supposed to do. We discipline the ones that won’t wear their masks or do what they were supposed to. We take their temperatures. But our hallways are tight, you can’t be

more than an arm’s length apart. It’s just not possible to social distance.

“It is infuriating. I don’t want to be typhoid Mary! If we don’t learn from history, we are doomed to repeat it.”

Such concerns about the lack of transparency on COVID and the suppression of information are widespread. Another Duval County teacher posted on social media today, “My HS student emailed me/her teachers today. She ‘tested positive over the weekend, as our principal informed us,’ and requested work while she will be out of school. Let me make this clear: We, her teachers, were NOT informed. A coworker and I approached our principal and were told only those in close proximity for 15+ minutes to COVID-positive students would be informed.”



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