

COVID-19 outbreaks erupt in Florida public schools as state demands further reopenings

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13 October 2020

Public schools in Florida are experiencing a dangerous growth of COVID-19 infections as the state government aggressively pursues in-class instruction in locations ravaged by the pandemic. The Florida Department of Health reported 5,570 new COVID-19 cases Sunday, which brought the total number of cases to a staggering 734,491, with over 15,300 deaths. Another 48 people died in the state Monday, the highest figure in the US.

As a consequence of the reckless and homicidal back-to-school drive demanded by state and county officials, some of the hardest-hit areas have begun to report outbreaks instantly after reopening. In Miami-Dade County, multiple coronavirus cases have been confirmed since students began returning to classrooms last week. The infections follow an order from county officials that 40,000 students return to schools for the final phases of the district's reopening plan.

Despite widespread opposition to the reopening of schools among educators and school staff, Florida's Republican Governor Ron DeSantis is pushing ahead with the resumption of in-person learning. The Florida Education Association (FEA), the largest teachers union in the state, has done nothing to mobilize educators and halt the premature reopening of schools. Instead, the union has resorted to using fruitless television ads to "pressure" DeSantis to release COVID-19 data related to schools.

In August, the FEA fraudulently touted as a "victory" a Leon County court ruling that granted local school boards and districts the ability to override state-mandated reopening requirements and decide locally whether to delay or resume in-person instruction. This minor concession has been short-lived, however, after a three-judge panel of the 1st District Court of Appeals sided with the state last Friday, overturned the ruling of Leon County Judge Charles Dodson that the reopening mandates of Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran violated the Florida Constitution.

Demonstrating the bankruptcy of the FEA's strategy of relying on the court system to guarantee the health and safety of students and educators, the appeals court said the union-led case lacked legal standing and was asking courts to

decide "non-justiciable political questions." The panel further said the union's arguments failed to demonstrate that Corcoran's order was "arbitrary and capricious."

The outcome of the court case has further emboldened the DeSantis administration to order the reopening of schools all across the state and pave the way for a massive resurgence of COVID-19. Confirmed COVID-19 cases have already been linked to four Miami-Dade County schools, with three students and one employee testing positive on Friday.

District superintendent Alberto Carvalho told media that contact tracing procedures and quarantine measures had been in place, but he did not reveal how many students and educators had come into contact with the known cases. The president of United Teachers of Dade, Karla Hernández-Mats, told media that there were at least six elementary schools in the district that had COVID-19 outbreaks.

School officials have estimated 20-25 percent of all Miami-Dade students will return to face-to-face learning by the end of this week. The highest demographic of students set to return are those in the primary grades, while the lowest rates are among high school seniors. The return of elementary students is mostly a result of the inability of working-class parents to remain home to care for younger children or afford child care for them.

This has been the primary motive behind the criminal back-to-school drive enacted by both the Democratic and Republican parties. This campaign has forced parents to choose between risking the health of their children and families by sending their kids back into classrooms or risk starvation and homelessness from being unemployed.

Miami-Dade County has been devastated by the pandemic, absorbing the bulk of coronavirus infections and deaths with more than 173,000 and 3,400, respectively. It was one of the last counties to be approved by DeSantis to move into phase two of the state's reopening campaign, which sanctioned the resumption of businesses and classroom learning.

Despite the grave risks to the health and safety of students, teachers and school workers, district and state officials have implemented reopening procedures that remain totally

inadequate to stop the spread of COVID-19. The school district has not put in place a comprehensive testing plan for the 142,000 students returning to in-person instruction. Following the outbreaks reported Friday, the district sought to evade public scrutiny by declaring that it had “ensured ventilation in schools” as part of its reopening plan, walking back on their statement last week that it had not installed recommended air filters at each of its 340 schools.

Anger among educators across the state is burgeoning over the reckless reopening of schools. A math teacher from Lake County who has been infected with COVID-19 told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “The drive to go back to in-person learning has negatively affected my health, even before getting COVID. I have lost my choice of protecting my health and family in this crisis, as I was given the ultimatum: risk getting COVID, or guarantee my family loses our home and cannot afford to eat.”

The teacher, who requested anonymity for fear of retaliation, spoke on the indifference and hostility that school administrators have shown to teachers returning to classrooms. She noted, “Last year, we could trust our admin. But they have changed, becoming cold and distant. They are treating us teachers as their enemies. The stress pressed upon us by admin has made everything even more stressful than it needs to be.”

In a sharp appraisal of the real driving force behind the back-to-school drive, the teacher said, “The push to send kids back to school is because we treat it as free daycare, and the only guaranteed meals that these kids can get.”

Expressing hostility to the super-rich and political establishment, she pointed to them not being required to risk their lives under the pandemic, commenting, “They are not going back to work in-person. Just the people who create the real wealth, the real value, that they leech off of.”

The DeSantis administration and local Republican and Democratic officials are pressing ahead with plans to force more K-12 and post-secondary students back onto campuses across the state, despite widespread outbreaks stemming from schools that have already reopened. In late September, the Florida Department of Health released its first state report with details on school-related COVID-19 data. The data showed a total of 4,689 COVID-19 cases had been tied to Florida’s K-12 and post secondary schools between September 6 and 26.

The report wholly discredits the declarations of DeSantis and other state officials that school reopenings have been successful. In Hillsborough County alone, the state reported 198 cases in K-12 schools and another 290 cases in post-secondary schools. In Pinellas County, the vast majority of COVID-19 cases reported during that period were tied to K-12 schools. For Pasco County, 121 positive cases were

reported in K-12 schools, while Manatee County reported 46.

While the data from this report is alarming in itself, the report has many limitations that undercount the true scale of the virus’ spread. Since the report only includes data since mid-September, it omits numerous outbreaks at schools that began reopening in August. Moreover, several schools from key districts are missing from the report’s analysis.

DeSantis, an acolyte of US President Donald Trump, has sought to disrupt and conceal information relating to the spread of COVID-19 in public schools. He suggested in mid-September that the report had been delayed because the administration’s Education Commissioner and Surgeon General were working on devising a report in a “digestable format.”

When the report was finally released, DeSantis brazenly said that he wanted the data to be released only if it offered a favorable view of the state’s school reopening plan. He declared, “I want to get it out,” so that “the story is a good story to tell.” The limited data from the report was only released following a lawsuit launched by a coalition of local news organizations threatening to sue Governor DeSantis for violating the state public record’s law.

Educators, students and parents must not let their lives be sacrificed for the sake of the profit interests of Florida’s corporate elite. As the FEA court case bitterly proved, the only way teachers can defend their rights and safety is not through appeals to the corporate-controlled court system and trade unions, but through the establishment of independent organizations led by teachers themselves that fight for their interests.

Educators must form a network of rank-and-file safety committees independent of the unions and both big business parties, to prepare for a nationwide general strike to halt the campaign to reopen schools and to eradicate the pandemic. We urge all those who wish to take up this struggle to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and contact us today.



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