

School worker deaths mount in Florida as virus spreads without restraint

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Two public school workers from Florida died earlier this month after contracting COVID-19 under conditions of an unmitigated spread of the virus in school districts statewide. The death of both workers, an elementary teacher and a staff member, is the latest confirmation of the criminal nature of the policy of reopening schools in the midst of a raging pandemic.

Deborah Menendez-Holloway, a second grade language arts teacher in Duval County, died of COVID-19 on January 11 at the age of 51. According to family members, Holloway was diagnosed with the virus in mid-December and was hospitalized shortly after. While those close to her revealed that there was uncertainty as to how exactly she contracted the virus, Holloway had been teaching in-person since the beginning of the school year and in a county with one of the highest rates of COVID-19 infections in the state.

Maria Hernandez was a 55-year-old paraprofessional and secretary for Mulberry High School in Polk County. She died from COVID-19 earlier this month after acquiring the disease in mid-December. Hernandez and her oldest son reportedly contracted the virus after attending a wrestling tournament involving seven Polk County schools. After a substantial number of residents became sick, the district was forced to cancel all athletic sporting events.

Many of the grief-stricken testimonials for Hernandez and Holloway described their deaths as sudden and unexpected.

The two join the many other educators who have died throughout Florida and nationwide as the pandemic continues to run rampant in schools. On December 12, a Brevard County middle school teacher became the second educator in central Florida to die from COVID-19, two days after her mother had succumbed to the virus. In Jacksonville, a mother and daughter who both taught at a nursery school died within days of each other in late December from COVID-19 complications.

Despite mounting deaths and infections among educators, numerous school districts are implementing reopening plans for the spring semester that involve even more students being sent into classrooms. Across the state, counties are

reintroducing remote learning as an option—rather than requirement—for the spring semester and are requiring shorter quarantines for those exposed to the virus in schools. Moreover, some schools have made efforts to reduce the number of teachers who engage in concurrent teaching, which is teaching in-person while also teaching a number of students online at the same time, to increase enrollment for in-person instruction.

Florida is one of the leading hotspots in the nation with more than 1.5 million people infected out of a population of 22 million and more than 24,200 confirmed deaths. The daily death rate has skyrocketed this week, with the number of fatalities climbing higher than 100 each day since January 9. The seven-day average is approaching a new record for the state, soon to surpass the numbers that were reached in the mid-summer after the state government virtually dropped all lockdown measures and mitigation efforts to contain the pandemic.

Following guidelines promoted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) last month, counties such as Hillsborough, Pinellas, Polk, and Sarasota have dropped the length of quarantine for students or staff exposed to coronavirus from 14 days to 10 days. In Polk County, the percentage of children who enrolled in brick-and-mortar schools at the start of last year was 55 percent with the remaining share taking classes virtually. Since then, more than 68 percent of children have returned to the classroom. In August, 60 percent of children in Pinellas County were enrolled for in-person learning; it has since grown to 70 percent.

In South Florida, which has been the state's main COVID-19 hotspot for months, parents for an estimated 76,000 children were sent letters this month saying that their kids are failing at remote learning and that they need to go back to the campuses. School officials are placing pressure on parents to sign acknowledgement forms recognizing that their kids are performing poorly while scapegoating online learning as the reason for poor grades. In fact, the online learning procedures in several counties have been plagued

by numerous connectivity issues and technology problems, making it nearly impossible for teachers to actually instruct students remotely.

Florida is currently ranked number three in regard to total confirmed cases, behind only Texas and California. Health officials confirmed on Friday that an additional 16,875 additional cases of COVID-19 had been added to the state's total, along with more than 186 deaths. Florida also holds one of the largest hospitalization totals for COVID-19, at more than 67,460.

Highlighting the dangerous consequences of the back-to-school drive in August, the Journal for the American Medical Association released a report earlier this week noting that pediatric COVID-19 hospitalizations have steadily increased since the beginning of the pandemic. From May 2020 to November 2020, Florida saw 653 children hospitalized for COVID-19. In just six months, the hospitalization rate went up 288 percent.

Many reports have surfaced touting recent data showing lower positive rates for COVID-19 tests and fewer hospitalizations. Case rates have largely fallen due to the severe absence of testing statewide. Following the orders of President Donald Trump and his pandemic advisor Scott Atlas, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis has made concerted efforts to systematically lower testing and deemphasize identifying people showing symptoms of COVID-19.

Since August, DeSantis has vigorously pushed for less testing in order to falsely improve the case rates for the state. During a joint tour with Atlas on August 31, DeSantis pressured public health officials in multiple cities to focus less on universal testing and divert attention towards reopening business attractions and schools. In both private and public meetings, the two spoke favorably of testing people for COVID-19 primarily if they are experiencing symptoms, a view that is largely condemned by health experts as unscientific and dangerous given the fact that asymptomatic COVID-19 carriers can still transmit the disease.

This is completely in line with the broader homicidal policy of "herd immunity," championed by the Trump administration, the Democratic Party, and corporate media, which is the demand that teachers and children be herded back into schools even if conditions are unsafe so that parents can be summoned to work and continue pumping out profits for the corporate-financial oligarchy.

Democratic Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber, a vocal critic of DeSantis and the Republican's approach towards testing, told CNN in late October that the state was "flying blind without tests." The Democratic Party and the incoming Biden administration, however, has no intention of stopping

more fatalities from occurring.

Biden's pandemic policies have surrounded mainly around encouraging mask wearing, while resting firmly in his pledge to reopen all K-8 classrooms nationwide this spring for in-person learning by the end of his first 100 days in office. The Democrats have embraced Trump's criminally negligent policy which is exemplified by Biden's recent coronavirus relief package. The package contains no guidelines for a systematic nationwide testing program and meager funds for testing resources in individual states.

Circumstances in Florida have become so dire that the White House Coronavirus Task Force released an ominous report last week to the state warning of disastrous consequences if the pandemic is not placed under control. The report noted that Florida was "in full resurgence," which will give way to "significant fatalities for many weeks and stress the staffing of the hospital system."

The report noted that Florida was in the "red zone" for the spread of the virus, meaning that it was among other states that will be overwhelmed with infections unless drastic measures are put in place to contain transmission. Even with the massive suppression of testing, Florida's positivity rate for COVID-19 remains at 10.1 percent. The task force ended the report by simply proposing that state leaders stress mask-wearing and strict social distancing, in contrast to the recommendations of leading epidemiologists that moving school instruction remotely and closing nonessential production are the primary measures that can halt mass death.

The aim of the DeSantis administration has been to fudge Florida's case numbers to appear as if it was safe for in-person learning in schools to continue. This irrational policy is being increasingly contradicted with the explosive growth of deaths.

Moreover, it is this criminal and inhumane policy which has animated the attack on Rebekah Jones, the courageous former state employee and COVID-19 whistleblower who was arrested on Sunday for her opposition to the premature reopening of schools and businesses. She exposed the false narrative promoted by the media and political establishment that schools are not major vectors for transmitting the virus. These actions come one month after DeSantis ordered a fascistic raid on Jones' house, in an anti-democratic attack on freedom of speech.



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