

The surge of COVID-19 in Florida and the disastrous reality of school reopenings in the US

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On March 9, an article was published by the NBC affiliate in south Florida featuring an interview with the superintendents of the Miami-Dade County and Broward County school districts, who spoke in glowing terms about their forced return of children and teachers to brick-and-mortar classrooms last autumn. Using the language of the Biden administration about a new “normalcy,” they declared that if the nation’s fourth and sixth largest school districts can reopen schools “safely,” then every district can.

It has now become clear, just three weeks later, that Florida is again becoming a major hot spot for COVID-19 infections, particularly among young people. The mainstream media, led by the *New York Times*, is referring to Florida as “a bellwether for the nation,” because it is the state that is furthest along in lifting COVID-19 restrictions.

Last week, Florida averaged nearly 5,000 new COVID-19 cases each day, which was an increase of eight percent from its average two weeks earlier. This latest increase is largely attributable to the masses of spring break crowds that were openly invited by the state.

The median age of COVID-19 cases has dropped since March 1 from 39 to 35, likely as a result of the spring break season, and this has been accompanied by a lower number of COVID-19 related deaths over the past two weeks. However, it is well established that deaths lag behind new infections, so one can expect to see an increase in deaths in the state in April and May.

Florida is also the state with the largest number of B.1.1.7 variant cases, originally discovered in the UK, which have been documented as being more contagious and more lethal than the wild type of the virus. Florida has about one-fifteenth of the country’s population but a fifth of the B.1.1.7 cases and a third of the P.1 variant cases, first discovered in Brazil.

The overall response to the pandemic in Florida has been spearheaded by Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, a Trump acolyte, who from the beginning rejected even the limited and inadequate restrictions made by other states. In the reopening of schools, DeSantis has had the full support of the Florida Department of Education and Education Commissioner Richard

Corcoran, who announced last July that all school districts would be required to reopen all “brick and mortar schools at least five days per week for all students” starting in August. As a result, approximately 80 percent of students in Florida are now attending schools in-person either full- or part-time.

The results of school reopenings in Florida have been a disaster, with 90,841 officially reported cases of COVID-19 in K-12 schools. Nearly 70,000 of these were students. There have been 11 pediatric deaths in the state since the beginning of the pandemic, and 42 active educators have died from COVID-19 since the reopening order was given last July.

Miami-Dade County and Broward County delayed their reopenings until October, because they have the highest number of residents in the state, and Miami was declared an epicenter for COVID-19 during the initial outbreak of the virus in March 2020. After the daily number of cases had decreased in August and September from their summer peaks, another large spike in daily new cases occurred in the winter months following the return to classrooms that has still not subsided to below pre-reopening levels.

The latest increase in daily new cases has no doubt resulted from the spring break crowds which dominate Florida every March and have been encouraged this season by the governor and the state. However, the corporate media outlets have sought to downplay the effect that school reopenings have had on the spread of the virus in the state over the past several months by utilizing data that is carefully curated by the state.

The *Wall Street Journal* published an article on March 17, stating, “data shows Florida started in-person learning without turning schools into super-spreaders.” The data they refer to shows that student and staff infection rates are lower than general community rates. However, Florida does not report COVID-19 outbreaks by setting, so one cannot conclusively say that the community rates are not significantly impacted by infections obtained through K-12 schools. In states that do report outbreaks by setting, like Michigan, schools have been shown to be the number one source of COVID-19 outbreaks.

Another element of the data that obscures the real presence of COVID-19 in the population is the lack of testing. Among the

approximately 20.6 million residents, only about 3.1 million individuals (roughly 15 percent) have ever been tested. Florida also does not report the age groups of those people being tested—they only show ages of cases, deaths and emergency room visits. Given that children are more likely to be asymptomatic carriers of COVID-19 than other age groups, the number of children tested is likely disproportionately lower than the number of people tested overall, which would result in a superficially lower rate of infection among this group.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has used this cherry-picked data to falsely claim that most students in Florida are not contracting the virus in schools. They point to the fact that between August and December 2020, only 25,094 school-related COVID-19 cases were reported among students, a mere 0.89 percent of the 2.8 million students registered in Florida. In reality, what is lacking in this data is cases *reported*, not positive cases in general.

The misrepresentation of data by state officials today shows why the courageous whistleblower Rebekah Jones was fired last May after she refused to manipulate data to support DeSantis' escalating back-to-work and back-to-school campaigns. Last December, the state attacked Jones' family and arrested her for presenting data that they would rather keep hidden. She continues to criticize the state on Twitter, recently describing the reckless reopening of schools in Florida as “an example of what NOT to do.”

The Florida Education Association (FEA), the statewide union affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the AFL-CIO, has glommed onto these spurious conclusions to assist the state with herding students and staff back into classrooms. FEA President Andrew Spar recently stated that “school reopenings ended up being safer than many feared.” The FEA response to school reopenings last summer was to file a lawsuit against DeSantis and the state, which served as a fig leaf to head off serious opposition among educators and parents to the homicidal return to schools.

School districts are using the intentional misinterpretation of data to press for more widespread summer school programs this year, adopting names such as “Elementary summer experience” and “Smart Start Camp.” Sylvia Diaz, chief academic officer for the Miami-Dade schools, recently stated, “We are concerned about the negative connotations of the [summer school] name and want to draw people in. With all that kids have been through, this is an opportunity to get the academic recovery started and an opportunity for kids to come back to school to socialize and see their friends.”

School superintendents claim that they will maintain safety guidelines set by the CDC, which recently reduced its recommendation for social distancing in schools from six feet to three feet, but parents and teachers say that in practice none of these guidelines have been followed.

When the WSWS asked Broward County parents and educators what they thought about the reduced CDC guidelines,

their responses were: “I think the students have never been 6 ft apart” and “Mine are about two feet apart, and more keep being added.” This is unsurprising given that the superintendents and the CDC are essentially leaving the mobilization of these important safety measures up to the students themselves.

On March 19, Miami-Dade County Schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho admitted in an interview that they were in fact following a one-meter World Health Organization (WHO) standard for social distancing even before the CDC reduced its guidelines. Both Carvalho and Broward Superintendent Robert Runcie have praised the reduction in guidelines, including the removal of barriers like plastic shields at desks. Carvalho bluntly stated, “Finally, the nation under its CDC guidelines has come closer to where Miami-Dade schools has already been.”

Meanwhile, the percentage of the Florida population that has been vaccinated mirrors the percentage that has been tested for COVID-19: about 15 percent. Florida has only recently lowered the age requirement for vaccines to those over the age of 40 and plans to allow 18 year olds to be vaccinated starting April 5. The rollout has largely been made through commercial pharmacies, such as CVS, Publix, and Winn-Dixie, which are using the crisis to boost their public image and sales.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls on all Florida educators and parents to oppose the homicidal and unscientific policies of the State of Florida and fight to close all schools and nonessential workplaces while the population is safely vaccinated in order to save lives.

The FEA has shown that it has no interest in fighting for a safe educational environment and is totally subservient to the state. Florida residents need to take this fight into their own hands and form a statewide committee to link up with other educators and parents across the country to prepare for a broader struggle to protect the lives of educators, parents, students and their communities on the basis of a scientific approach to the pandemic. We urge all those who agree with this fighting perspective to sign up today to join and help build a Florida Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee !



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