

Thousands of students in Tampa, Florida placed on quarantine days after schools reopen

Alex Johnson
18 August 2021

More than 10,380 students in Florida's Hillsborough County school district were sent into quarantine this week after hundreds COVID-19 positive infections were detected among children. Nearly 400 students were confirmed positive for the virus on Monday after a little more than a week into fall semester as the entire state has moved to resume full in-person learning in schools.

According to Hillsborough County Public Schools' dashboard, 1,805 total cases among students and employees have been reported since classrooms opened up on August 9. The district, which encompasses Tampa and its immediate suburbs, is the third largest district in Florida. It currently has 338 school employees in quarantine out of 23,596 in addition to the 10,384 students in isolation out of a total of 213,491 districtwide.

The extraordinary toll the virus is now taking on the population is a testament to the recklessness of the reopening strategy designed by district officials and underlines the criminal handling of the pandemic by Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, whose administration has threatened all school districts with funding cuts, fines and reductions in salaries if they enforce mask mandates on campuses.

The county joined the majority of regions in the state which elected to adopt an "opt-out" option for mask wearing, which gives parents and students the choice to wear masks without mandating it be worn on school premises. In response to the ominous growth in cases, the school district's policy has been to isolate students for seven days after close contact with unmasked COVID-19 cases. Vaccinated students, despite being able to transmit the virus, are not required to be isolated unless they show symptoms.

A majority of the isolated students, nearly five percent of the student population, were placed on quarantine

because they had opted-out of wearing masks or were exposed during lunch periods or other settings where masks could not be worn sufficiently. Like all major school districts in Florida, Hillsborough has completely scrapped its online e-learning remote program as an option this year, which has left thousands of students in isolation potentially having no access to instruction during their quarantine.

In response to the catastrophe now unfolding, Hillsborough County's school board was forced to hold an emergency meeting on Wednesday where they voted to reverse their previous policy and mandate masks for all students and staff. The vote now eliminates the option for parents to immediately opt their children out of the mask mandate and now instead requires parents to seek permission from a medical professional to allow their children not to wear masks.

"There is an immediate danger to the public health, safety and welfare," board member Nadia Combs stated after the vote was passed. Hillsborough had seen 929 cases confirmed among students on Monday before having that number jump to 1,800 infections Wednesday, an almost 100 percent rise within less than two days. The number of isolations soared by 4,780 after having 5,599 recorded on Monday.

School board members decided to meet for their emergency discussion a day after state officials punished two other Florida districts for violating the governor's order prohibiting school districts from establishing mask mandates. Florida's Board of Education voted Tuesday to impose sanctions against Alachua and Broward counties for defying DeSantis' demand that districts include an opt-out option for masks. The details of the penalties, the first to be handed down by the right-wing governor against districts seeking to establish safety measures, were not

made known following the board's decision.

Florida's Department of Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran sent a letter earlier this month to Broward County School Board Chair Rosalind Osgood and interim Superintendent Vickie Cartwright threatening to invoke the sanctions if the district's policy did not add the opt-out option that DeSantis' order requires.

In clamoring for the elimination of all public health measures aimed at quelling the deadly virus, Corcoran ferociously denounced school districts that choose to prioritize safety precautions above the antiscientific and reactionary opposition to masking. "We have districts who are picking and choosing what laws they want to follow," he declared at a virtual education meeting on Tuesday.

The Broward County district has reportedly remained undeterred by the penalties that were announced against the county. District officials have opted to begin classes on Wednesday without including the Governor's opt-out option allowing parents to choose against their children wearing masks.

Although local officials have expressed opposition to the Republican administration of DeSantis, Broward County, which is a stronghold of the Democratic Party, has stood steadfast in their opposition to remote instruction for the school year and has lined up with the Republicans in herding students and faculty into schools despite the rising tide of infections. Robert Runcie, the predecessor of interim Superintendent Cartwright, stated as early as April, "it is our intention, as a school system, to open up, full time, in-person this coming fall."

The homicidal and politically-motivated assault on the school districts comes amid warnings of a catastrophe awaiting students and educators forced into unsafe classrooms, as deaths among educators and staff have begun to grow. Last week, two teachers and a teacher's assistant from Broward County died from COVID-19 within just three days. Moreover, doctors in South Florida have been reporting a massive surge in pediatric COVID-19 cases over the past month leading up to the start of classes.

At Broward County's Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital, pediatricians reported treating more than 240 children with COVID-19 in July after caring for just 20 children in June. Just in the first 10 days of August, they've seen 160 children positive for the virus, with five being placed in the hospital's intensive care unit (ICU). Dr. Marcelo Laufer, a pediatric infectious disease specialist, said there has also been a spike in COVID-19

cases at Nicklaus Children's Hospital in Miami-Dade County. Pediatricians reported on Tuesday that 25 child patients were being treated for the virus, with seven remaining in the ICU.

At Miami's Jackson Memorial Hospital, Chief Medical Officer Dr. Hany Atallah pointed to the Delta variant as the main culprit for the sudden explosion of child infections, which is coinciding with the reality facing students nationwide as the variant has become the dominant coronavirus mutation in the US. Atallah noted that doctors are seeing higher viral loads in patient's bodies and accelerated transmissibility. In addition, patients who have not been vaccinated are experiencing more severe symptoms.

In Orange County, which is home to Orlando, the school district shattered its record of COVID-19 daily cases among students on Monday, skyrocketing from 97 on Friday to 238 new positive tests. The school district has recorded 898 confirmed cases among students and faculty since August 2, with 552 students and employees currently in quarantine. Meanwhile, a public health crisis was also revealed on Monday when Orange County Mayor Jerry Demings, along with health officials, noticed elevated levels of COVID-19 have been detected in the region's wastewater. According to Demings and other health experts, the concentration of the virus in wastewater was "very high" and "very concerning."

County officials shared the announcement during a coronavirus briefing at the Eastern Water Reclamation Facility in Orlando, which is one of the largest wastewater facilities in the county. According to Orange County officials the plant, which serves more than 280,000 residents, is one of the three of the county's largest wastewater facilities that are witnessing an alarming growth in the detection of coronavirus, pointing to the risk of increased transmissibility heightened by the community spread caused by school reopenings.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact