

Governor DeSantis withholds funding from Florida schools with mask mandates

Kevin Reed
31 August 2021

Florida Republican Governor Ron DeSantis has acted on his threat to withhold funding from school districts that make mask-wearing mandatory in the new academic year. The Florida Department of Education announced on Monday that two districts with mask mandates have forfeited a monthly amount of state funding equivalent to the salaries of school board members.

DeSantis took the action in defiance of a court ruling issued Friday stating that DeSantis's ban on local school mask mandates was unconstitutional and could not be enforced. Ignoring the court ruling, Florida Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran said the state was withholding funds from the Alachua and Broward county school systems "for their continued violation of state law."

Corcoran presented the Florida government's murderous policy as protecting "parents' rights to make health care decisions for their children."

The Florida Department of Education confirmed in an email to NBC News that the school districts' funds had been withheld since Thursday. State Communications Director Jared Ochs claimed the department "plans on continuing to follow the rule of law" and is "immediately appealing this [court] decision to the First DCA [District Court of Appeals] from which we will seek to stay the ruling."

In response, Alachua County Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Carlee Simon said, "Our School Board members made a courageous decision to protect the health and lives of students, staff and the people of this community, and a court has already ruled they had the legal right to do so. They deserve praise, not penalties."

Broward County Public Schools board member Sarah Leonardi posted on Twitter: "Perhaps Commissioner

Corcoran should reread the Florida Constitution because I swore an oath to 'provide a safe, secure and high-quality system of free public schools.'"

It is clear that mask mandates by themselves cannot stop the spread of the deadly Delta variant of COVID-19. What is required is a comprehensive policy to eradicate the virus with aggressive public health measures, which include masking, vaccination, lockdowns, travel restrictions, universal testing and contact tracing, and the isolation of infected individuals.

Nevertheless, the attack by the DeSantis administration on Florida school districts with mask mandates is part of the efforts by the US political establishment to implement "herd immunity" and allow the virus to infect the public unimpeded, so as to defend the wealth accumulation interests of the capitalist elite.

The withholding of school funding takes place just as the Delta variant is raging in the state, particularly attacking teachers and school children. The state is the epicenter of the pandemic, with more than 31,000 new cases on Monday and an average of 16,000 people hospitalized over the past seven days.

According to an American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) report dated last Friday, 26,822 children tested positive for COVID-19 in Florida during the prior week, bringing the total since the start of the pandemic to 311,102. While the state government stopped reporting child hospitalizations and the case numbers are known to be vastly underreported, the one-week increase in child infections is extremely alarming.

The AAP report also revealed that another 23 children died in the US, bringing the total to 67 child deaths in the month, with 47 in the last two weeks alone, all record numbers throughout the pandemic.

As part of DeSantis's fascistic agenda, the state

government has modified the manner in which COVID-19 deaths are being counted. According to a report in the *Miami Herald* on Tuesday, the Florida Department of Health has “changed the way it reported death data to the CDC, giving the appearance of a pandemic in decline.” On Monday, the state reported 46 pandemic deaths per day over the previous seven days, on the basis of data that would have previously shown an average of 262 daily deaths.

Social epidemiologist and assistant professor at Emory University Shivani Patel said that the change in methodology is “extremely problematic,” given that it was implemented without warning or explanation during a rise in cases. Patel said that Florida’s death data now shows an “artificial decline” to make it “look like we are doing better than we are.”

The AAP reports that the number of children infected nationally with COVID-19 last week increased by 203,962 and represented 22.4 percent of the total weekly reported cases of 910,826.

The impact of the surge in Florida schools was demonstrated tragically in the Indian River County School District, where two school teachers died from COVID-19 a week apart. Tabitha Blair, 42, of Sebastian, who taught fourth grade at Treasure Coast Elementary School, died on August 18 after suffering from the virus all summer and never returning to the classroom. On August 26, Sara Zevallos-Gonzalez, 45, an English-Spanish teacher at Fellsmere Elementary School, died.

Other recent teacher deaths in Florida from COVID-19 include: Michelle Cook, 51, Sarasota County; Travis Barnes, 47, Santa Rosa County; Lillian Smith, Miami-Dade County; Jayla Smith, Collier County; Kelly Peterson, 41, and Norma Reyes, 52, Polk County .

Leon County Circuit Judge John C. Cooper ruled against Governor DeSantis on August 27 and said he agreed with parents who had sued the state. He said he would issue a written order soon.

Cooper said the law permits school districts to take action that some parents dislike to support the public good and that it does not provide for banning mask mandates.

Even with the Delta variant surge already underway, Governor DeSantis issued an executive order on July 30 for Commissioner Corcoran to withhold funds to

“noncompliant” school boards that impose masking requirements.

The order was in part a response to the recommendation issued several days earlier by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) calling on teachers, students and school staff to wear masks at the beginning of the new school year.

On August 27, Commissioner Corcoran sent a series of letters to school districts across the state stating that any mask mandates had to include a provision allowing a parent or legal guardian of a student “to opt-out the student from wearing a face covering or mask.” For school boards that defied the mask mandate rule, the letter continued, the Department of Education would withhold funds “until the district comes into compliance.”

The gangsterism of the DeSantis administration is a continuation of the methods used last December against data scientist Rebekah Jones, the former employee of the Florida Department of Health who was fired for being an outspoken critic of the governor and exposing his efforts to undercount the number of infections in the state. When Jones refused to distort Florida COVID-19 data to support the back-to-work and back-to-school campaign of DeSantis, a SWAT team was sent to raid her house, aimed guns at her and her family, seized her computers and data files.



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