

Two Florida teachers die within one week of each other as COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations grow

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2 September 2021

Two Florida teachers from the same school district died in a single week last month from COVID-19. Sara Zevallos-Gonzalez and Tabitha Blair of Indian River County are the latest victims of a reckless reopening strategy that is claiming the lives of countless teachers nationwide and is leading to a growing number of infections and hospitalizations.

On August 26, Zevallos-Gonzalez, a 45-year-old Fellsmere Elementary school and English-Spanish teacher, died from the virus just three days after contracting the disease. Described by Fellsmere Principal Ramon Echeverria as an “energetic young lady, full of life,” Zevallos-Gonzalez passed away the day after speaking to Echeverria on a FaceTime call. “It’s just like, you cannot believe it because we just saw her yesterday even though she didn’t look great,” Echeverria told ABC News affiliate WPBF. “You know, you don’t think she is going to die, this is not what we were thinking.”

Blair was a 42-year-old fourth grade teacher from Treasure Coast Elementary School in Sebastian, Florida. She succumbed to the virus on August 18, leaving behind two children. While she reportedly was not exposed to the virus at her school, she remained sick with COVID-19 all summer and was unable to return to campus this fall due to her illness.

These deaths are a part of a heartbreaking and growing string of recent COVID-19 fatalities among educators and schools along with an alarming rise of hospitalizations among children. Pediatric hospitalizations are climbing to record highs following the reopening of schools. According to data compiled by the Department of Health and Human Services, Florida reached the grim milestone of 200 total pediatric COVID-19 patients this week.

Local 10, an ABC affiliate in Miami, reported Monday that school bus drivers in Miami-Dade County are dying

over COVID-19 at an “alarming rate.” The most recent death was Tim Jones, a veteran trainer, who leaves behind his wife and a newborn child after a two-week battle with the disease. A 30-year veteran school bus driver died on the first day of school and the numbers continue to rise. Phyllis LeFlore, president of the AFSCME Local 1184, reported that about seven employees were dying every week. “Now everybody is getting scared. That’s all I hear this morning. That we are scared,” LeFlore told Local 10.

The deaths of Blair, Zevallos-Gonzalez, Jones and others accompany the growing health crisis facing the district and entire state as the virus continues to ravage communities, forcing the shutdown of schools that were approved for indoor operations and classroom learning.

Three weeks into the fall semester, Indian River County has seen two school closures because of the explosive growth of infections, particularly among faculty and staff. A spokeswoman for the district confirmed Tuesday Treasure Coast Elementary will be closed from Wednesday until September 13.

The closure of Treasure Coast follows the district’s decision last month to shut down Beachland Elementary School until September 7 because of the growth of cases among students and staff.

At Treasure Coast, at least 38 students and 10 employees have tested positive for COVID-19 since the semester began on August 10. Since the start of the school year, 416 students and 145 employees across River County have tested positive for the virus, according to district officials. An additional 144 students have also tested positive with at-home COVID-19 tests, though the results have yet to be confirmed by the Florida Health Department.

Indian River is one of several school districts in Florida that have discontinued in-person learning due to the

disastrous resurgence of the pandemic, with officials now scrambling in the face of astronomical rise in cases. According to reports released by the Florida Education Association last month, Charlotte and Hernando counties each closed one school immediately following their reopenings in early August while one school in Bay County delayed their opening late last month. At least 21 different classrooms in Lee County have thus far been closed.

The deadly resurgence of the virus, largely being fueled by the far more transmissible Delta variant, has thus far driven approximately 100,000 students and school staff in Florida into quarantine and isolation. In Hillsborough County, more than 10,000 students were forced into quarantine shortly after reopening on August 10. More than 8,300 students in Brevard County were sent home in late August following a massive outbreak. In spite of such worrisome figures, only a handful of Florida's 67 school districts have consistently reported confirmed infections or direct exposures to infected individuals, according to the FEA's COVID-19 tracker, meaning dozens of regions that are likely swelling with community transmission from schools remain unaccounted for.

But similar to every other school district in the state, no plans are in place in Indian River County to permanently close all schools and transfer to online learning until infections are contained. On Monday, the county announced that it was issuing mask requirements for students in kindergarten through eighth grade, but this is only planned to last until September 15.

The mask mandate comes in defiance of the anti-democratic measures enforced by Republican Governor Ron DeSantis and his Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran. Both forged ahead yesterday with their threats to withhold salaries for school board members in Alachua and Broward because of their efforts to enforce mandatory masking on campuses.

The fines against the board members were greenlighted despite a Leon County judge ruling last week that DeSantis' ban on mask mandates was unconstitutional. The governor, whose name has been trending on Twitter as #DeathDeSantis for several weeks, responded to the judge's decision with unrestrained hostility and vowed during a press conference on Monday to appeal the court's ruling. In defending the governor's criminal policies, Commissioner Corcoran released a statement justifying the attack against school districts as a "fight to protect parent's rights to make healthcare decisions for their children."

Corcoran pledged to continue the state's vicious assault on school boards and districts who defied the state's authority, calling mask mandates "unacceptable" and that "elected officials cannot pick and choose what laws they want to follow." According to state authorities, school districts that have put in limited mitigation measures, such as in Palm Beach County which is seeing its pediatric ICUs inundated with sick children, have until the end of this week to withdraw their mask requirements or face further penalties.

The homicidal pronouncements of DeSantis and Corcoran have been echoed in the state's Republican-led legislature. Rep. Randy Fine, a member of the Florida House Education Committee and chair of the PreK-12 appropriations subcommittee, told CBS12 News this week the state should go even further than withholding school board member salaries and expressed the belief the Florida Department of Education had the right to fire school board members if they do not withdraw their mask policies. "They certainly could do more, I would encourage them to do more," Fine said. "We cannot have lawless dictators running our school boards."

The punitive and unconstitutional actions being taken against masking in schools follow new rules the state added last week aimed at punishing businesses, schools and local governments that implement vaccine requirements. The Florida Department of Health filed the ruling which lays out that each individual person working within an institution could face up to \$5,000 worth of fines for requiring proof of COVID-19 vaccinations from customers or other members of the general public.

This rule establishes the form through which the department will enforce a bill the state legislature passed in May, SB 2006, which bans businesses, governments and schools from requiring "vaccine passports" or proof that people seeking service in a particular enterprise have received a COVID-19 vaccine. The new regulation targeting individuals with such an outrageously exorbitant fine is meant to further intimidate anyone who dares defy the state's reactionary reopening policies.



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