

Fifteen educators and staff from Florida's Miami-Dade School district die within ten days as COVID-19 deaths skyrocket across state

Alex Johnson
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Fifteen educators and staff from Florida's Miami-Dade County School district died from COVID-19 within 10 days between the last week of August and the first week of September, according to a tally made by NBC 6 South Florida.

While it remains unknown when each employee contracted the virus, the deaths came after the district's start of the fall semester on August 23 and amidst a third wave of the pandemic that has claimed the lives of dozens of Florida educators and staffers who've been forced to resume in-person learning.

One of the deceased Miami-Dade staffers who died was 55-year-old teaching veteran Abe Coleman from the Liberty City neighborhood of Miami. Coleman was a third-grade math instructor for 31 years and the director of a well-known youth mentoring project for impoverished boys. The program, 5000 Role Models of Excellence Project, was designed to mentor young men and assist them with entering college.

Alongside the fifteen deaths in South Florida, which has seen the highest rate of infections and deaths since the onset of the pandemic, countless similar reports are surfacing of schools witnessing scores of educators and staffers falling ill or dying because of the virus.

A mother and daughter who worked as employees for the Miami-Dade district, Lilian Smith and Lakisha Williams, died just days apart from COVID-19 in early August before they were set to begin the semester later that month. Smith was a teacher at Dr. William A. Chapman Elementary School and was also a veteran educator with 45 years of experience in the district, while Williams had worked 17 years for the school system and was recently promoted as a cafeteria manager.

Responsibility for these tragic deaths lies with the criminal policies of Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, who has led a crusade against mask mandates and other safety measures in schools, as well as President Joe Biden and the teachers unions who have repeatedly promoted the falsehood that it is possible to reopen schools safely and that educators' lives and well being are not in jeopardy by being placed in overcrowded classrooms with dozens of students where the virus has ample opportunity to spread.

Other districts are witnessing the consequences of the catastrophic reopening campaign. On August 20, Seminole County's Winter Springs High School teacher Mark Huaman passed away at the age of 58 from COVID-19 complications just 10 days after the district reopened its schools. Huaman was a prominent figure in the district. In addition to being a widely-liked English teacher, he helped win numerous state and national championships as the head coach for the school's softball team.

The death of the beloved educator came as a shock to students and colleagues in Seminole County, which has grappled with its own health crisis sparked by the resumption of in-person instruction. According to the district's dashboard, there have been 1,775 total cases of COVID-19 since school started on August 10 and 1,340 active quarantines. The large number of those infected or quarantined are mirrored in almost all of Florida's 74 school districts, posing incalculable risks to students, faculty and staff that can only lead to a surge in deaths as schools remain open.

The spike in deaths in public schools is just one expression of rising fatalities statewide that are being fueled by the more infectious Delta variant of the coronavirus, which has turned Florida into a hotspot for the nationwide resurgence of the pandemic. More than 6,600 people died of COVID-19 in Florida in August, making it the state's deadliest month throughout the pandemic. An average of more than 213 people died per day last month according to official figures, with many August fatalities still yet to be added to the state's health registry. Since the start of the outbreak, the state has confirmed 3,354,836 COVID-19 cases and 46,973 deaths connected to the virus.

Although both the case-positivity rate and hospitalizations have dipped slightly over the past two weeks, the most recent data has pointed to a dramatic increase in weekly deaths, an indication that the lag between hospitalizations and deaths has begun to shrink as more critically-ill patients succumb to the disease. A report from Florida's Department of Health last Friday showed 2,345 fatalities had been added from that week, a 73% rise from the 1,727 recorded the week prior.

With the virus allowed to run rampant, Florida now accounts for nearly a quarter of new COVID-19 deaths in the US and has the

second highest fatality rate per capita in recent weeks behind Mississippi. The newest seven-day average of COVID-19 deaths in Florida, 346, amounts to 23 percent of the 1,498 deaths that are being recorded in the US each day, according to COVID-19 data compiled by the *Washington Post*.

Meanwhile, many doctors and media outlets have pointed to the failure of the state to report consistent data on fatalities on a county-by-county basis. State government and local public health officials have refused to provide information on deaths in local communities for more than three months, despite this being common in almost every other state, making it difficult for the public to know which areas are suffering the worst toll.

Officials for the state's Department of Health said that it has not tracked and published such information because county death tolls can be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website. However, the number reported on one CDC webpage undercounts Florida's tally by thousands, and the CDC's most prominent map of county-level COVID-19 deaths shows only blanks for each of the state's 67 counties.

Although Florida's vaccination rate is slightly higher than the national average, one of the causes for the rise in deaths is the state's disproportionate number of elderly residents who are especially vulnerable to the virus. More fundamental, however, are the policies of Governor Ron DeSantis, which have amounted to nothing less than the herd immunity strategy demanded by the financial oligarchy and co-signed by the Democratic Party. This policy dictates that the virus be allowed to run rampant without any restraint on corporate profit making, including the rejection of shutting down schools so that parents can return to work to enlarge the personal fortunes of the ruling class.

Moreover, this policy also entails the rejection of even the most basic mitigation efforts such as masking and vaccination mandates. The right-wing Governor DeSantis spearheaded a witch hunt this past week against school districts who defied his executive orders and sought to enforce mask mandates on campuses to deal with spiraling outbreaks. Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran announced recently that the state was moving forward with plans to withhold salaries from school board members who put in place any mask requirements for students.

Last week, DeSantis appealed a judge's ruling that stated the governor overreached his powers prohibiting mask mandates in schools. The decision to appeal is a warning that no attempts will be made by the state government to even stem infections, even if deaths continue to climb.

Besides repudiating masking efforts in schools, the governor has signed a number of reactionary legislation the past several months aimed at removing all local health restrictions, such as banning businesses, government agencies, and other institutions from enforcing vaccine requirements or "passports" for customers and patrons. The Florida Department of Health announced last week that it was issuing fines up to \$5,000 to any individual associated with an organization that violated the state's banning of vaccine requirements.

While the fascistic actions of DeSantis lays bare most nakedly the ruling class's homicidal pandemic policies, the Democratic Party's strategy has amounted to paying lip service to the

protection of human life while offering no opposition to the Republicans. Agriculture Commissioner Nikki Fried, the state's only statewide elected Democrat and a potential challenger for DeSantis' governor position next year, called the fines "an insult to the free market principles that he claims to champion." With DeSantis' popularity plummeting the past two months and amid widespread public hatred to his policies, the only appeal the Democrats have made to the broader population is to vote for the Democrats in the next governor's election.

Similarly, the stance of the trade unions, led by American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, has been characterized by the feeblest criticisms while enforcing the reopening of schools for in-person learning over the objections of teachers and parents. Instead of mobilizing its thousands of members in a serious struggle to oppose the unsafe school reopenings, Weingarten has resorted to mouthing empty jabs against DeSantis.

While in Miami last Friday, the union bureaucrat, who makes more than \$500,000 per year, said DeSantis was "more concerned about his political aspirations than the safety and the wellbeing" of educators. In reality, Weingarten's visit to South Florida, which followed the death of teacher Lillian Smith, was a part of her tour of school districts throughout the country to promote the dangerous back-to-school campaign and tout inadequate mitigation measures as a solution to the pandemic.

Union officials like Weingarten, who tweeted in early August pleading with DeSantis to "put politics and pride aside and prioritize safety," are more concerned with how best to herd teachers into unsafe classrooms instead of fighting to keep students and teachers safe and take the necessary steps to eliminate COVID-19.

To oppose the homicidal policies pursued by both big business parties, Florida educators, parents and students must build rank-and-file safety committees in their schools and workplaces and join up with the international network of committees which are fighting for the scientifically guided public health policies that will save lives and end the pandemic.



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