

102 Florida educators and 24 students died of COVID since schools reopened in August

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On Sunday, October 24, The World Socialist Web Site will host an online event featuring a panel of scientists, to explain how COVID-19 can be eradicated and the pandemic finally brought to an end. We urge all those concerned about the situation in Florida to register today.

The Florida Education Association revealed this week, in its “Safe Schools Report,” an appalling increase in COVID-19 deaths and infections among educators and students in the state compared to the same period last year.

According to the data, the number of Florida children who have died from COVID-19 currently stands at 24 compared to 10 last year. The number of active educator coronavirus deaths has already more than doubled from 46 last year to a staggering 102 thus far. The victims include teachers, bus drivers, custodians and school nurses.

Florida’s harrowing growth of school-related cases and fatalities, along with quarantines and forced school closings, are the products of the abandonment of online instruction and resumption of in-person classroom learning, which has been spearheaded by Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, the Democratic Party and the educators unions.

Additional information in the report testifies to the dangerous spread of the virus in schools. The number of confirmed Florida students and educators who have tested positive during the pandemic grew from 116,881 in 2020-2021 to 165,638 today. The number of full closings of school campuses has risen from 21 to 31. Meanwhile, the number of staff and students in quarantine for both respective school years rose 209 times, from 1,235 last year to 258,481 so far this year.

Among those who have tragically succumbed to the virus is Greg Myers, a 64-year-old former support teacher from Crestview High School in Okaloosa County. Myers died last week after battling with COVID-19 complications for several weeks and being hospitalized in an intensive care unit (ICU).

In mid-September, 24-year-old D’Anthony Dorsey, a marine biology teacher at Auburndale High School in Polk County died due to complications from the disease. Shortly before Dorsey’s death, his mother sent a message to WFLA News urging elected officials to reverse their stance on mask mandates in schools, which Governor Ron DeSantis and the Republican-controlled legislature have prohibited.

His mother said Dorsey had no comorbidities and had been a

long-time athlete. “He’s young and healthy and look what happened,” she said. While the article on Dorsey’s death states it is not known whether he contracted the virus at school, his mother believes his illness was the result of returning to the classroom. “Just within the first week of school, he got sick,” she recalled. “So the likelihood that he contracted it at school or through the meeting of the parents or students is what we’re leaning towards because he has not been anywhere.”

COVID-19 has taken a particularly devastating toll on school staff in Polk County, with the region making up nearly a quarter of the state’s educator deaths. The FEA’s report added seven more Polk County Public Schools employees that have died from COVID-19 this past month, bringing the total to at least 16 known deaths from the virus since school began August 10.

Despite the grim uptick in deaths, district officials have obstinately rebuffed calls for even a mask mandate on campuses. Like every local union in the state, the Polk County Education Association has not lifted a finger to mobilize educators to fight the homicidal mask policies, let alone shut down the campuses altogether and halt the spread of the disease.

These damning fatality numbers are being released at a time when school districts are abandoning even the most basic public health protocols to monitor the spread of the disease. Many of Florida’s school districts have disabled their public dashboards for tracking campus-related pandemic statistics. Moreover, with most local areas refusing to track the disease, the numbers presented in the FEA report are certainly an underestimate. The report itself admits the actual number of confirmed cases for students and staff is significantly higher, pointing to lax restrictions and the removal of district dashboards.

In addition to the rise of infections, the pandemic has had indirect effects on the schools, with many facing enormous crises compounded by years of neglect and dilapidated infrastructure. Shortages of teachers, which were already at record levels before the pandemic, have worsened since the start of this school year, with vacancies for teachers surging by more than 5,000. The shortage is fueled by the unwillingness of educators to risk their lives to work in unsafe workplaces.

Florida is also experiencing an acute bus driver shortage. A report by the Associated Press in early August revealed the state’s 20 largest districts were having trouble filling bus driver openings, forcing some drivers to handle extra routes.

The absence of reporting is not only limited to various school

districts but has been emblematic of the entire state health department's response to the recent resurgence of the virus. The Florida Department of Health (FDH) stopped reporting daily county deaths to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in early June. Shortly thereafter, the FDH halted its weekly reporting for counties, with the CDC's map of county-level COVID-19 deaths showing blanks for each of the state's 67 counties.

The move by the school districts to remove dashboards has been an integral part of the back-to-school agenda that's been facilitated by the FEA. The union has faithfully toed the line of its affiliates, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), with both promoting the lie that schools can be reopened safely with inadequate and rapidly dwindling mitigation measures. In fact, more than 100 educators and four dozen children have lost their lives in less than three months, with the unions standing not only unopposed, but actually supportive, of the continuation of in-person education.

The union bureaucrats for these corrupt organizations, such as Randi Weingarten, whose official salary is roughly \$500,000, have devoted all their efforts toward fulfilling the demands of President Joe Biden that schools be reopened regardless of the impact on children and educators. Acting in the interests of Wall Street and the corporations, the Biden White House and unions moved to fully reopen schools this fall in order to herd students into unsafe classrooms so that as many parents as possible can return to work and pump out profits.

Both at the statewide and nationwide level, the trade unions have done everything possible to encourage the ruling-class's desire for "herd immunity," which means normalizing mass transmission of the virus in order to "save the economy," i.e., enlarge the fortunes of the super-rich. Important in this strategy has been using the teachers unions as an instrument for suppressing and clamping down on the opposition among educators to this murderous policy.

On September 30, the AFT co-hosted a town hall meeting with the far-right parents group Open Schools USA. The event gave a platform to an array of pseudoscientists who oppose COVID-19 vaccinations, advocate the removal of mask mandates and all mitigation measures in schools, with the notion that infecting all children with COVID-19 will help develop "herd immunity" for the virus.

One of the peddlers of this unscientific and fatal perspective was Jay Bhattacharya, a co-author of the Great Barrington Declaration (GBD) which called for "herd immunity" through the infection of all young people. Bhattacharya is also an acolyte of DeSantis and heaped praise on the governor for his opposition to lockdowns and mitigation measures.

Last April, Bhattacharya and other public health "experts" participated in a roundtable held by DeSantis, which attacked social media platforms for removing anti-scientific conspiracy theories related to the pandemic. He railed against the notion that downplaying a virus amounted to "misinformation" and called the promulgation of murderous "herd immunity" conceptions an "open exchange of ideas."

The hypocrisy and cynicism of the FEA is placed on full display in the introductory, and short, summary of its "Safe Schools

Report" which places all the blame for the disaster facing the schools on DeSantis.

The FEA report issues token criticisms of DeSantis, describing him as a "bully" who is centrally responsible for the crises taking place in the state's schools. It cites his government's withholding of funding for public emergency response and his constant threats to seize funding for schools that implement mask mandates.

However, the unions have done nothing to oppose the attacks on educators led by DeSantis and the state government's Board of Education. The Board voted unanimously last week to penalize eight school districts for requiring mask-wearing in schools. Penalties for mask mandates will include withholding the salaries for school board members and stripping funding from districts.

Due to their commitment to keep classrooms open in the face of mass death, the unions refuse to call any strike action or walkouts to wage a struggle to save lives. Instead of organizing opposition, however, the report resorts to platitudes such as calling out "bad behavior." The report ends with a feckless and worthless appeal for teachers to email DeSantis.

The explosion of cases and deaths among educators and children resulting from the reopening of schools clearly exposes the FEA and the major national unions as accomplices of the far-right and drive for profits by the ruling elites. The overwhelming opposition among educators to this brutal policy finds no expression through the unions, which represent the interests of capitalism and not their memberships.

A mood of militancy is growing, however, among parents, educators and students in the US and internationally for a fighting strategy to end the pandemic. On October 1, a global school strike was initiated by British parent Lisa Diaz and was greeted with a significant international response, with calls for a second global school strike being held on Friday, October 15. Educators and parents have formed rank-and-file committees internationally in opposition to the deadly reopening of schools. Affiliated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), these committees are fighting to close schools and nonessential workplaces as part of a broader strategy aimed at eradicating COVID-19.

The IWA-RFC urges all educators, parents and workers who seek to end the pandemic and save lives to register to attend and take part in the upcoming October 24 webinar hosted by the IWA-RFC and the WSWs, "How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication." Over the coming week, rank-and-file committee meetings will be held across the US to build interest in the upcoming webinar and give expression to a fighting strategy for ending the pandemic.



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