

Three of Florida's largest school districts remove mask mandates in school

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Florida educators, parents and students who oppose the lifting of mask mandates in schools and want to fight to end the pandemic should sign up here to build a rank-and-file committee in your district.

District officials and school board members in three of Florida's largest school districts—Orange County, Broward County, and Miami-Dade County—effectively ended their mask mandates last week, signaling a capitulation of Democratic Party-led counties to the demand of Republican Governor Ron DeSantis that even the most limited mitigation measures meant to stop the spread of COVID-19 be removed in schools.

In Orange County, the ninth-largest school district in the US, with roughly 200,000 students, a 60-day mask mandate was allowed to expire on October 30, after county board members decided not to renew it. In announcing the district's decision to abandon mask protocols, Superintendent Barbara Jenkins said an extension was not necessary because of the "significant reduction in the number of COVID-19 cases" in the county.

Students in these districts are now able to attend instruction without masks due to a new opt-out provision adopted by the Orange County district, with parents deciding if their child should wear a mask. Although the new rule only applies to students, and teachers, visitors and parents must still wear a mask on school grounds, the provision will certainly lead to a more explosive growth in infections. Children spread coronavirus just as readily as adults, and cramming them into unsafe overcrowded classrooms and hallways without protection will only worsen transmission.

For Broward County, the school board voted in a 5-3 decision to lift the mask requirement for only high school students. Earlier in October, board members agreed to revisit the requirement if vaccination levels in the county rose to 66 percent and the case positivity rate fell. A document posted last week by the school board said that current conditions "recommended the District eliminate its face covering mandate at this time," while encouraging the "use of face coverings and quarantining practices to avoid any 'spikes' in positivity and until such time as the COVID-19 pandemic is no longer a community health risk."

The three board members who rejected the decision pointed to the reckless nature of abandoning safety measures in the county. Broward is the nation's sixth largest school district, with roughly 270,000 students, and it is one of the few major metropolitan districts nationwide that has even considered easing its mask restrictions. Board representative Sarah Leonardi said, "It seems

that we are having this discussion here in South Florida, but there are other districts nationally that this isn't even a question." Nora Rupert, a representative of District 7, said, "I don't think it's a very fair situation to put our young ones and their families at risk."

Miami-Dade Schools Superintendent and Democrat Alberto Carvalho also announced last week that the district was removing its mask mandate for high school and middle school students. Miami-Dade is the largest district in the state and fourth largest nationwide, with nearly 360,000 students. Excluding those who attend K-8 centers, students will no longer have to wear a mask if their parents sign a form opting them out of the mandate. Carvalho said the decision came after "significant, extensive and frequent consultation" with medical experts who were supposedly unanimous in their recommendation.

Significantly, Orange County's decision to remove the district's mask mandate will include children aged 5-11, who recently received Federal Drug Administration approval to receive vaccinations but who have only just begun to be vaccinated. In justifying the jettisoning of masking in schools, Superintendent Jenkins referred primarily to statements made last Wednesday by Democratic County Mayor Jerry Demings, who declared that he was allowing his own executive order mandating masking and other mitigation efforts to expire that week.

Demings claimed the "state of emergency" order was no longer needed because the county's COVID-19 positivity rate hovered at about 3.5 percent for the previous 17 days, which is below the World Health Organization's five percent threshold for considering the virus contained. With the emergency order lifted, unvaccinated county employees will no longer have to take a weekly COVID-19 test or wear masks indoors unless the employer requires it.

The optimistic portrayal presented by Demings was contradicted by the county's weekly report on COVID-19 cases and positivity rates. The county's weekly COVID-19 case rate per 100,000 residents increased from six to 7.2, while the test-positivity rate ticked slightly up from 2.3 percent to 2.5 percent.

In announcing the decision, Demings relayed the fact that COVID-19 claimed 410 lives of county residents in August as the Delta variant raged across the state. The Mayor also sought to blame DeSantis and his ruthless prohibitions on local public health policies, even as the Mayor implemented the full reopening of schools this fall and refused lockdown measures.

The districts' decisions came just a few weeks after a report by

the Florida Education Association revealed that over 102 educators and 24 students have died in the state since August alone. The teachers unions, however, have done everything possible to suppress the widespread opposition of teachers. As a testament to the role the unions have played in the back-to-school campaign, Broward Teachers Union President Anna Fusco said in a statement that she was “proud” that Broward County was “strongly encouraging high school students to wear masks.”

All three of the counties were among eight districts who defied rulings imposed by Governor DeSantis and the Florida Department of Education (DOE) prohibiting districts from requiring masks within schools. The mask reversal comes weeks after the DOE approved plans to dock salaries and withhold funding from local school districts that defied Ron DeSantis’ ban on mask mandates in classrooms. Broward and Alachua Counties were the first regions impacted by the right-wing policy, which also threatened reductions of overall funding to the counties if they received federal grants intended to blunt the state’s fines.

In response to the penalties, the Biden administration and US Department of Education sought to allot federal aid money to Broward and Alachua districts to offset the deductions. However, the Florida DOE then decided to strip local school boards of this federal aid money, directly defying the Biden administration and rebuffing US Department of Education warnings that the move would violate federal requirements in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Florida education officials classified the federal government’s warnings as “harassing and legally hollow,” indicating the state government would move ahead with punishing school districts that implemented safety protocols.

Parents from all three districts responded to the announcements on social media with a flurry of denunciations of the decision of district officials to lift mask mandates. In Orange County, parents pushed for the mandate to be extended at least until the winter break in mid-December. Many parents pointed out the fallacy behind claims that masking was no longer needed, which contradicted what most of the doctors on the district’s medical advisory panel recommended. Lora Vail, a founder of the “Mask Up OCPS” Facebook group, said, “Obviously we are very disappointed in this news. We were just asking for a six-week extension, which stuck with all current medical advice.”

On October 25, a “Don’t Stop Now” rally was held in Orange County by a group of parents and local residents demanding the School Board renew its policy of face-coverings for students. Jenifer Hills, a parent of a second-grader in the district and one of the rally participants, told local news, “How well we’re doing and the COVID numbers are in large part due to the masks. It’s our first line of defense against the virus.” Hill continued, “If we take away their best protection, which is the masks at this moment, we’re leaving them extremely vulnerable.”

The assertions being made by local officials that circumstances are now safe for the abandonment of mask requirements are in fact dishonest and unscientific, as many epidemiologists warn against premature celebrations of the pandemic being over. In fact, the US and the entire Northern Hemisphere are heading into a deadly winter season that is expected to parallel the massive surge from last year.

In an ~~October 24~~ ²⁶ webinar “ sponsored by the *World Socialist Web Site*, Dr. Eric Feigl-Ding, an epidemiologist and Senior Fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, responded to a question about where he saw the pandemic going in the next three to six months without a wholesale overturn in policy. He stated, “On a world scale, we will still be counting bodies in six months’ time. We are going to have a very bad winter in the Northern hemisphere.” Several other scientists participating on the panel agreed with this prognosis.

The October 24 webinar emphasized the need to fight for a strategy aimed at eradicating COVID-19, which involves not just imposing inadequate mitigation measures such as mask-wearing in classrooms, but the closure of schools and nonessential businesses until cases are brought to zero, combined with mass vaccination, testing, contact tracing and other measures, along with full economic support for workers affected by necessary closures. Such measures are opposed not just by the fascistic Republicans, but also by the pro-corporate Democrats and trade unions, with all of them in agreement that children and teachers must be sacrificed so that parents can return to work to produce profits for the ruling elites.

This policy of social murder, spearheaded by capitalist governments the world over, must be fought against through the mass mobilization of teachers and the entire working class in a struggle to implement scientifically-guided measures aimed at ending the pandemic and saving lives. All Florida educators, parents and students who wish to take up this fight should contact us today to build a rank-and-file committee in your district.



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