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Florida Schools & Florida's Businesses?

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Dear snowbirds and tourists: There is no question that Florida's businesses, restaurants, hotels, fishing guides, and theme parks need you and want you. It's simple, our state economy depends on visitors, and we want you to come and we want you to spend your money. We're hurting.



Some have asked us about visiting us at our office in Sarasota and about visiting Florida for vacation. We want you. The office is being retrofitted. One of our folks can describe the details of our office building to you. Be prepared to mask, sanitize hands and socially distance. Most of our staff still works remotely. We don't want them to get sick, and we don't want you to get sick.

Let's get to the whole state. There we have problems. And this is how we see the risk.

Florida's governor has tried to limit truthful reporting of data. We're opening schools without full information in the public domain. Florida's COVID response is still a question to many who live here. And we're a large state, so things vary widely from place to place as you will see below.

If you come, bring a supply of masks and face shields and rubber or nitrile gloves and hand sanitizers and Clorox wipes (I personally have had wipes on back order for weeks) and a good supply of your meds. If you want to buy health necessities here, research your needs and availability in advance of your trip. Things are better than they were but you are best prepared to check ahead of your visit.

When you come, be prepared for encounters with maskless arrogance and belligerent politics. And if you're bringing family, the exposure to COVID-19 multiplies with numbers of people facing indoor air-handling systems and practicing reduced social distancing. And there are a lot of people here in Florida who ignore the warnings about distancing. Governor DeSantis has reopened the bars. Watch the news for yourself and decide about your health and safety for yourself.

We want you to be fully informed before you expose yourself to risk. Here's Rebekah Jones's website tracking COVID-19 in Florida: <https://floridacovidaction.com>. And here's Florida's official state website: <https://floridahealthcovid19.gov>. We recommend you research the county and city you are going to visit.

Let's get to Florida's schools, because they are a big factor this fall. In Florida, cases among school-aged children are up 34% in the month since school began. That alarming uptick in cases among children should surprise no one who looks at a photograph of Gov. Ron DeSantis addressing a group of Suwannee High School football players in their locker room. No masks, no distancing.

For the striking photo taken on September 4 and a report on the increase in cases, see “Coronavirus cases spike among school-age children in Florida, while state orders some counties to keep data hidden,”

https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/florida-coronavirus-schools/2020/09/08/711fa780-eee4-11ea-ab4e-581edb849379_story.html.

Dear readers, you can compare Florida’s situation with your own and with your planned visit geography. Please remember every school is a potential super-spreader to some degree. And when there is muzzling of public data from your government (DeSantis), you are left to figure it out for yourself. Below is a series of curated Florida stories. We’ve organized this list so that you can read bullets quickly or dive deeply into links as you like. Please research for yourself.

In Florida, confirmed deaths have now topped 12,000. There are disputes about how much higher the “real” figure is.

“Florida surpasses 12,000 coronavirus deaths; new cases on the decline.”<https://www.palmbeachpost.com/story/news/coronavirus/2020/09/06/coronavirus-florida-marks-its-12-000th-death-due-virus/5734073002/>

A decline in overall new cases in Florida is good news; however, we fear that good news may be temporary, given the rise in cases occurring among Florida’s school-aged children. As of September 10, Florida hospitals have treated 667 children for COVID-19 symptoms. Eight children have died, and 64 have suffered Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome.

(http://ww11.doh.state.fl.us/comm/_partners/covid19_report_archive/pediatric_report_latest.pdf)

When Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran’s order to reopen schools for all students five days a week (no A/B schedules) was issued (<http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/19861/urlt/DOE-2020-EO-06.pdf>), there were concerns across the state about reopening schools, but those were quashed by the DeSantis administration and its Department of Health. Local health departments provided schools no guidance related to closing for safety’s sake in light of alarming community spread, and that was apparently what they were told to do.

“Was Palm Beach County’s health director ‘politically silenced’ in recommendation to keep schools closed?,”
<https://www.wptv.com/news/region-c-palm-beach-county/was-palm-beach-countys-health-director-politically-silenced-in-recommendation-to-keep-schools-closed>

With widespread COVID-19 cases across the state, concerned educators reacted and the FEA mounted a legal challenge to the emergency order. The order to reopen was struck down in court.

“Florida Judge Strikes Down Order Requiring Schools to Physically Reopen Amid Covid-19 Risks,”<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/24/world/covid-19-coronavirus.html#link-bd84ee2>

In his decision, Leon County Judge Charles Dodson determined that Richard Corcoran’s order usurped school districts’ roles and left them with no alternative but to reopen campuses for full-time instruction regardless of risk. The court’s ruling was put on hold almost immediately as the state appealed the case.

“Florida judge: Reopening public schools ‘disregards safety’,
https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/08/24/florida-judge-reopening-public-schools-disregards_ap.html

Some Florida teachers, alarmed by the state’s disregard for their safety and the safety of students and their families, have resigned or retired earlier than planned.

“UNION: Teachers resigning over COVID-19 concerns in Pinellas County,”
<https://www.abcactionnews.com/news/region-pinellas/union-teachers-resigning-over-covid-19-concerns-in-pinellas-county>

“Safety Concerns Over COVID-19 Driving Some Educators Out of the Profession,”
<https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/safety-concerns-over-covid-19-driving-some-educators-out>

As quarantines multiply and school staffing issues loom, at least one Florida school district – Polk County – now says that teachers who have been exposed to the SARS-CoV-2 virus may report to work, risking further spread in order to keep a school’s doors open.

“Florida public school district says teachers who are exposed to COVID-19 but are asymptomatic can CONTINUE coming to work as ‘dozens of teachers are in quarantine’,
<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8694967/Florida-school-district-says-teachers-exposed-COVID-19-asymptomatic-working.html>

The Polk County decision was made possible because the federal government’s added educators to its list of “essential workers”; thus Polk County Schools in Florida will likely be joined by other districts across the nation.

“Deemed ‘Essential Workers,’ Some Teachers Told to Skip Quarantine After COVID-19 Exposure,”
<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/08/21/deemed-essential-workers-some-teachers-told-to.html>)

Governor DeSantis continues to push for schools to remain open even if cases rise.

“DeSantis says Florida schools with coronavirus cases shouldn’t be quick to shut down again,”

<https://www.heraldtribune.com/story/news/2020/08/14/floridas-coronavirus-infections-increased-6-148-friday-563-315/3374892001/>

Amid this vast experiment using teachers and students as guinea pigs, state-wide COVID-19 data for schools is not currently publicly available. The Florida Dept. of Health released an initial report and quickly retracted it, calling its release a mistake.

“State report shows hundreds test positive for COVID-19 at Florida schools in August,”

<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/coronavirus/article245241965.html>

The Department of Health claimed that school-based COVID numbers are confidential, though privacy is not violated by overall school numbers and the public health case for revealing those numbers is compelling.

“Florida Department of Health claims number of COVID-19 cases in schools is confidential,”

<https://www.news4jax.com/news/local/2020/08/28/florida-department-of-health-claims-number-of-covid-19-cases-in-schools-is-confidential/>

“Florida Department of Health stays silent about school-related COVID-19 cases,”

<https://www.jacksonville.com/story/news/education/2020/09/02/dept-health-stays-silent-school-related-covid-19-cases/3446169001/>

The Department of Health has even tried to silence districts that reported numbers to the public.

“Department of Health orders Duval Schools to pause publishing COVID-19 numbers,”

<https://www.jacksonville.com/story/news/coronavirus/2020/08/26/health-department-orders-duval-schools-stop-publishing-covid-19-numbers/5636447002/>

Under mounting political pressure and an early stage recall petition drive, Ron DeSantis appeared to pull the rug out from under his Department of Health when he claimed, “What I’ve said is, put out as much information as we have.” Floridians we know don’t trust DeSantis and will wait until comprehensive school data appears on the Florida Department of Health website. Failing to compile school district data on the state website looks like one more effort to keep Florida out of the “bad news” headlines that point out leadership failures.

“Gov. DeSantis says he supports releasing coronavirus school data,” <https://www.wfla.com/8-on-your-side/investigations/gov-desantis-says-he-supports-releasing-coronavirus-school-data-in-florida/>

Emboldened, and accountable to their constituents, more Florida school districts are posting COVID-19 case information for their schools. They are on their own. Meanwhile, data scientist Rebekah Jones has created a dashboard to report cases in schools around the country. Readers can find that here: <https://www.thecovidmonitor.com/>. No doubt Rebekah would have done this for Florida had Ron DeSantis not fired her.

Here is a partial look around the state, from and about districts that are reporting:

“More Florida school districts posting COVID-19 case numbers, offering more transparency than state,”

<https://www.abcactionnews.com/news/local-news/i-team-investigates/more-fla-school-districts-posting-covid-19-case-numbers-offering-public-more-transparency-than-state>

“More than 800 quarantined after COVID cases at Central Florida schools,” <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/education/os-ne-covid-cases-schools-update-20200909-7g5fkzwze5doxhw3wxex4roq6a-story.html>

“Hillsborough releases dashboard that shows COVID-19 cases in schools,” <https://www.abcactionnews.com/news/region-hillsborough/hillsborough-releases-dashboard-that-shows-covid-19-cases-in-schools>

“Duval Schools releases dashboard with 27 COVID-19 cases,”

<https://www.jacksonville.com/story/news/coronavirus/2020/09/06/27-covid-19-cases-listed-duval-county-releases-school-dashboard/5734043002/>

“Manatee County Schools to implement COVID-19 dashboard, Sarasota County schools to launch version next week,”

<https://www.mysuncoast.com/2020/09/03/manatee-county-schools-implement-covid-dashboard/>

“Tampa Bay Schools Are Reporting COVID-19 Cases. Here’s A List,” <https://health.wusf.usf.edu/post/tampa-bay-schools-are-reporting-covid-19-cases-heres-list#stream/0>

“COVID-19 in Tampa Bay schools: a weekly update,” <https://www.tampabay.com/news/education/2020/09/05/covid-19-in-tampa-bay-schools-a-weekly-update/>

“Orange County Public Schools sees 18 COVID-19 cases at 16 schools this week, district says,”

<https://www.wftv.com/news/local/orange-county-public-schools-sees-18-additional-cases-16-schools-this-week-district-says/BXY3RYKMSRB23ICZ7OFBDEQYPU/>

“3 Central Florida schools closed due to COVID-19 cases,” <https://www.fox35orlando.com/news/3-central-florida-schools-closed-due-to-covid-19-cases>

“PCPS confirms COVID-19 cases on 34 district campuses,” <https://www.theledger.com/story/news/2020/09/06/coronavirus-update-pcps-confirms-covid-19-cases-34-school-district-campuses/5734832002/>

“Coronavirus: Leon County a hotspot on New York Times map; LCS reports more student, staff cases,” <https://www.tallahassee.com/story/news/2020/09/06/coronavirus-seven-big-bend-deaths-lcs-reports-9-students-employees-positive/5734270002/>

“DOH head Dr. Karen Chapman reports 27 COVID-19 cases identified in first week of school,” <https://www.nwfdailynews.com/story/news/2020/09/09/florida-doh-head-dr-chapman-reports-27-covid-cases-okaloosa-schools/5756287002/>

“Manatee County School District has sent 770 into quarantine since school started,” <https://www.heraldtribune.com/story/news/education/2020/09/11/manatee-schools-have-sent-770-into-quarantine-due-covid-19/3467494001/>

Not all districts are reporting cases, of course; and much remains to be seen. What kinds of school reopening plans actually work, if any, while there is still community spread? How many coronavirus transmissions happen through contacts at school? How many family members become ill because students or teachers contracted COVID-19 at school and brought it home? How many Florida tourists will pick up the virus here and take it home to their own communities? How many deaths will result from all this?

None of these questions can be answered without complete, reliable, transparent data. The DeSantis administration’s early overconfidence about reopening early and without sufficient care resulted in widespread cases of COVID-19 in Florida. We already saw this on spring break, Memorial Day, and July 4th, and we await data tied to Labor Day. DeSantis’s backtracking to implement safer measures and behaviors (though there is no statewide mask mandate and implementation of public health recommendations appears to be inconsistent) has brought cases down, but not down far enough to make reopening schools safe, judging from the dramatic rise in cases among children since school started.

And now Florida is on track to pay the price of failed governance – some Floridians will pay with their lives. The DeSantis administration and the Florida State Department of Health are trying to make it harder for the public to see the complete picture about what’s happening in Florida’s schools. Floridians know it. Teachers and parents know it. Tourists and snowbirds need to follow it, too. We want you to visit. And we want you to come with full information and be safe when you do.

We must get the economy open and do it with safety. We cannot do it without full information and transparency. Why is this so hard for a politician to understand?

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