

COVID on the rise, numbers peak in back-to-school transition

By Mariana De Jesus and Valentina Padula

By March 2021, vaccination shots were available to all citizens 16 and older. However, with the country falling short of President Biden's goal of 75 percent partially vaccinated citizens by Jul. 4 and with the reopening of schools by mid August, COVID cases and deaths have been on the rise.

The introduction of back-to-school learning and the newly widespread Delta variant have drastically surged cases in Fla., causing an all-time high of 29,711 weekly average cases on Aug. 16. While Broward County is seeing a steady decline in 39 percent of cases every two weeks, the weekly average is at a high 1,008 cases recorded as of Sept. 16, according to *The New York Times*.

“Now that kids are going to school in person, there is a higher chance of transmitting the virus,” said MD PGY-2 internal medicine resident at Creighton University School of Medicine Dr. Michelle Garcia. “It is a place where you are in a closed, confined environment with multiple people in your space.”

Since the March 2020 lockdown, Broward County has implemented a series of policies and mandates in an attempt to limit the spread of the virus, including three to six feet of social distancing and indoor masking. Fla. schools are planning to continue these policies throughout the 2021-2022 school year for students, administration, teachers and parents on campus.

“It is very tricky when you are getting information last minute,” said Algebra II teacher and senior Student Government Association (SGA) sponsor Karen Syrocki. “When you are told that a policy changes suddenly and then you are supposed to implement it, feel comfortable, and enforce it, it is hard. It is not easy.”

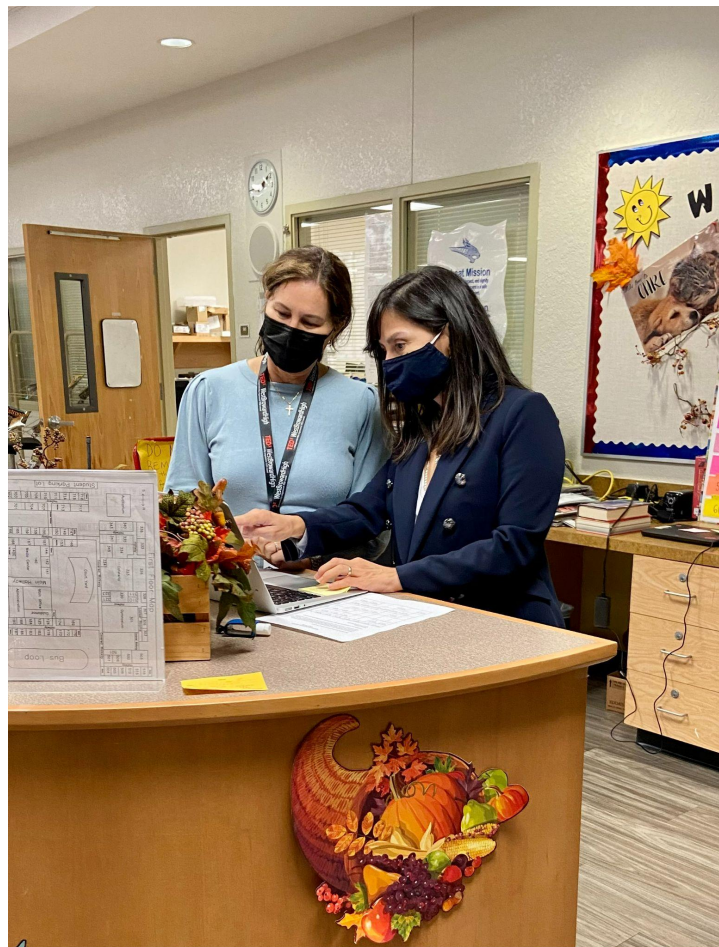


PARABOLAS IN PANDEMICS: Karen Syrocki’s Algebra II class works attentively on a worksheet while sitting in groups with their masks on. Broward County has gone against Governor DeSantis’ optional mask policy and required students to be masked while on campus. *Photo by Valentina Padula*

However, Fla. governor Ron DeSantis had recently implemented an opt-out option for masking at schools, allowing parents to determine whether their child will wear a mask. After a court ruling on Aug. 27 that had overturned Governor DeSantis’ policy, an appeal was made on Sept.

10 that places the option in schools once again. Although Broward County has decided to go against this policy and continue the mask mandate, multiple schools across Fla. have already switched back to online learning due to outbreaks of COVID.

“I find it sad that we are surging right now with the numbers,” said First Responder and EKG program teacher Jodi Osman-Arno. “If people would do their part by social distancing and wearing their masks, I think that would cut down the increase of COVID cases that we are getting.”



MASKING UP: Media Specialist Norma Tchir and Media Center Assistant Virginia Scavino work together in the Media Center. Tchir and Scavino have continuously worn their masks since the start of the school year and have abided by campus guidelines. *Photo by Valentina Padula*

Along with a recent relaxation in mask mandates, the Delta variant has been able to massively contribute to the recent increase in cases since it is more transmissible and twice as infectious, according to the *New York Times*. As of Sept. 12, 2021, Fla.'s weekly average is 15,606 reported cases per day, 12,600 hospitalizations reported and 350 deaths per day according to *The New York Times*.

“From what I have read, the Delta variant is more contagious in how it is applied and how it is transpired,” Syrocki said. “The Delta is probably the most generic, widespread, fastest-catching client right now.”

Created to combat the virus, COVID-19 vaccinations first emerged in January available to frontline public health care workers and have since expanded to anyone above 12 years of age according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Despite having been out for over seven months, only 59 percent of Broward County is fully vaccinated as of Sept. 14, according to the *New York Times*. The high transmissibility of the Delta variant combined with back-to-school learning has propelled a sudden increase in vaccination rates. In July, 628,319 individuals had been fully vaccinated compared to August's heightened rates of 864,953 total individuals according to USA Facts.

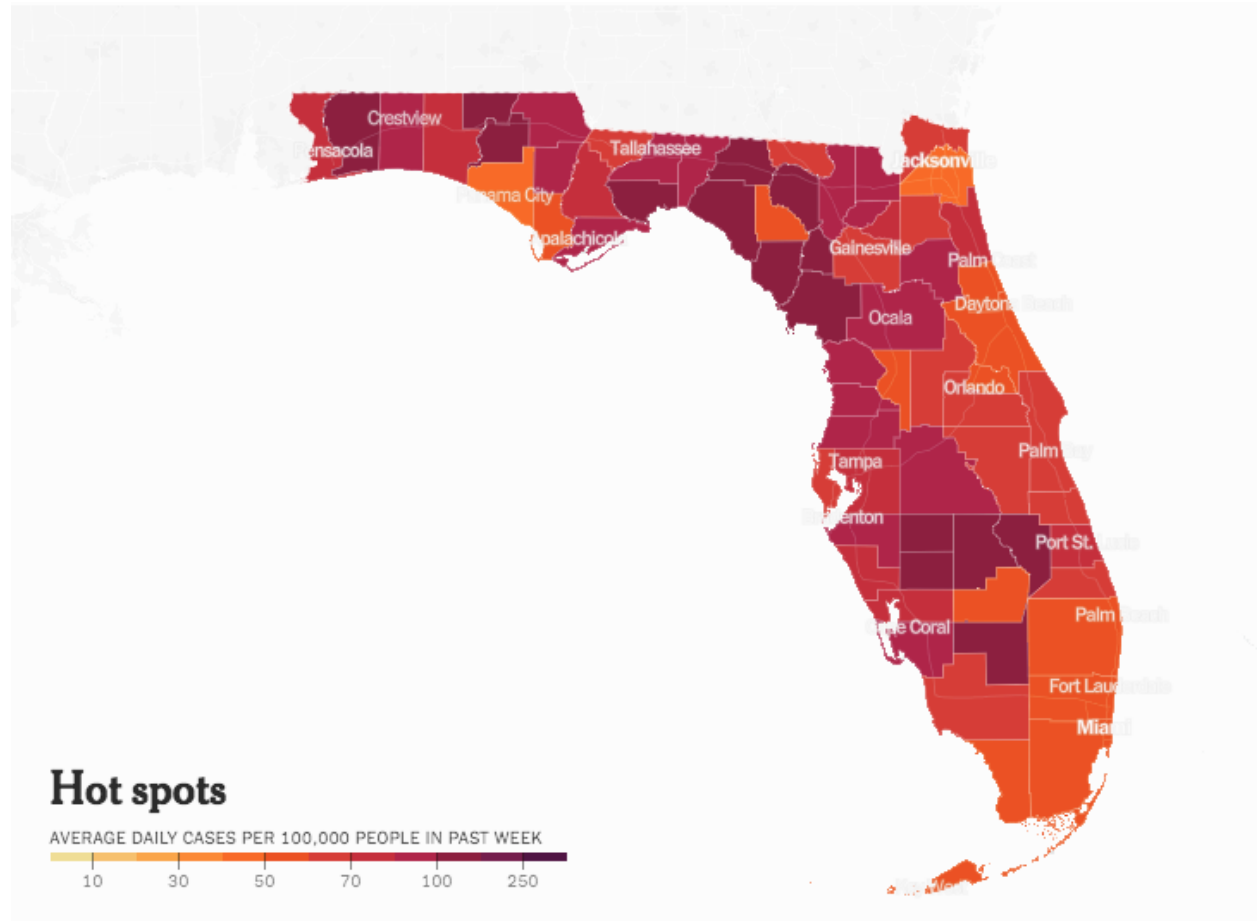
“Those who are not vaccinated are the ones who are getting sicker, but just because you are vaccinated does not mean that you can not have the virus,” Garcia said. “You can still get the virus and you can still transmit it.”



BEHIND THE COUNTER: West Broward alumni and pharmacist Aisha Drovie prepares to administer a COVID-19 vaccine to a patient behind the counter at a Walgreens’ pharmacy center. In the wake of the vaccine, pharmacists like Drovie have been doubling their efforts, administering 82 percent of Fla.’s vaccine doses as of Sept. 12, according to *USA Facts*. *Photo by Valentina Padula*

Recently, a new mutation, the “mu” variant, has developed with only about 21 cases in Ill. recorded as of Sept. 7, according to NBC News. White House Chief Medical Advisor Dr. Anthony Fauci has stated the lack of immediate threat in the “mu” variant, classifying it as a “variant of interest.” Even as society frequently advances in knowledge and progression, COVID continues to fluctuate and mutate. With constant new developments in vaccinations, variants and societal limitations, the lack of certainty has sparked skepticism for the future of the pandemic. However, through the combined efforts of the public and scientists, COVID-19 can be dealt with with fervor.

“The virus will continue to evolve and change, and if we continue to not try to prevent the spread, it will continue to take over,” Garcia said. “And we are going to be in this cycle over and over again without end.”



TOO HOT TO HANDLE: Broward County demonstrates the effects of its efficient back-to-school policies, displaying a bright orange rather than red. The rest of Fla.’s counties are shaded in various hues of red and orange accordingly with their daily average cases recorded, with the “hot spots” mainly concentrated on the panhandle of the state and the central counties. *(Graph courtesy of The New York Times)*