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SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT: NIKKI FRIED PERPETUATES COVID-19 MISINFORMATION



Contact:

Communications Office
NewsMedia@flhealth.gov,
850-245-4111

The Department of Agriculture Releases Inaccurately Represented Data

Tallahassee, Fla.— Today, the [Florida Commissioner of Agriculture](#), Nikki Fried, [released](#) misinformation regarding school data that lacks epidemiological accuracy and credibility. The Florida Department of Health, the State’s public health agency and lead on all infectious disease control, welcomes the opportunity to debunk a multitude of issues found during the seven minute, thirty second presentation on inaccurate data representation.

There is no evidence that schools are high risk locations of spread. [A study](#) supported by CDC and completed by the State Epidemiologist, alongside the State Surgeon General and other top experts at the Department of Health, found that fewer than 1% of students had school-related COVID-19.

Second, a brief data quality check revealed several calculation errors, which include a critical error in the inaccurate estimate of average cases per capita, which were then used as the basis for their analysis.

Additionally, the data set is not complete or representative of the entire state. This results in false interpretation of data. Further review of the data by a qualified epidemiologist should have occurred prior to publication.

To provide context into what is required to maintain scientific credibility when analyzing public health data, the [National Center for Biotechnology Information](#) outlines the requirements of epidemiological methodology as the following:

“Epidemiology utilizes an organized approach to problem solving by:

- (1) confirming the existence of an epidemic and verifying the diagnosis;*
- (2) developing a case definition and collating data on cases;*
- (3) analyzing data by time, place, and person;*
- (4) developing a hypothesis;*

(5) conducting further studies if necessary;

(6) developing and implementing control and prevention measures;

(7) preparing and distributing a public report; and

(8) evaluating control and preventive measures.”

Myth:

This data shows clear evidence that school districts requiring masks resulted in up to seven times lower COVID-19 cases per capita than school districts that did not require masks.

Fact:

Perpetuating causation utilizing incomplete, nonrepresentative and inaccurately conceptualized data is misleading. School case data collected by districts should not be compared without accounting for differences, because they may not be collected the same way. Some may require proof of results, some may not. Some may capture a wider range of results, including home tests, some may not. Some may include multiple positive test results for each student, some may not. The analysis presented by the Department of Agriculture does not define case data.

Myth:

22 school districts that required masks saw fewer COVID-19 total cases per capita than those that did not.

Fact:

This is not an appropriate comparison of data. Only 33 of Florida's school districts have public dashboards which were used for this analysis, and the majority of the schools required masks. This immediately skews data. 42% of the students from counties without mask mandates were excluded from this analysis. This is a skewed comparison of data that is inherently flawed, and not representative of the state, nor does it allow for a credible conclusion.

Myth:

- Five largest school districts had average 0.48 peak cases per capita, while five smallest school districts had 3.51 peak cases per capita.
- Seven times higher student COVID-19 peak cases per capita in the smallest school districts, without mask requirements, than in the largest school districts, where masks were required.
- 600 times higher peak cases per capita in maskless Highlands County (12 cases per capita) than in masked Miami-Dade and Broward Counties (0.02 cases per capita).

Fact:

This presentation does not account for differences in the community, including variations in demographics, vaccine rates, etc. Specifically, Highlands County is

inherently more rural with a significantly lower population than Miami-Dade and Broward counties – two very populous and metropolitan areas of Florida. Additionally, fewer weeks of data were utilized to calculate cases per capita for Miami-Dade as school years started at different points in time.

The Department of Health discourages attempting to analyze data and develop conclusions without a full understanding of limitations of the data, and without appropriate application of epidemiological methods.

About the Florida Department of Health

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