



Curbing virus is key to reopening schools, saving economy

BY LINDSAY STREET
STATEHOUSE CORRESPONDENT

Reopening school has become a central focus from the Statehouse to the White House this week as politicians seek to save a floundering economy.

"The thing we're the most focused on is how do we get the economy moving as quickly as we can to increase jobs, increase people's pay and get children back in school?" said state Rep. Kirkman Finlay, the Columbia Republican who chairs the House COVID-19 Employment, Workforce and Business Recovery Committee.

But coronavirus cases are still soaring in South Carolina, leading medical experts to caution that the state needs to reel in the virus before reopening schools.

Data showed this week that Arizona, Florida and South Carolina led the world in coronavirus cases per capita. As of Thursday, South Carolina had 50,548 confirmed cases with more than 20 percent of those tested being positive for the virus. There have been 898 confirmed deaths linked to the coronavirus. State health officials predict that the death toll will soar to nearly 3,000 by Oct. 1.

FEDERAL AID TO END SOON

Unemployment related to the pan-

demic has crippled the state's economy. Previous to the virus' emergence in the state, the jobless rate was 2.5 percent — or 58,614 looking for work. In May, 12.5 percent, or 303,218, were reportedly without jobs.

Since mid-March, 651,750 people have received unemployment insurance benefits in the state, according to the S.C. Department of Employment and Workforce (DEW). Under a worst-case scenario, the agency has estimated its unemployment trust fund could go into debt by December.

The state's average weekly benefit of \$236 has been supplemented by \$600 per week from the federal government. But the federal boost is scheduled to end July 25, DEW said. The federal program also paid 13 weeks beyond the state's 20-week limit on unemployment.

"We are now approaching a big financial shift nationwide as the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation program is set to expire," DEW director Dan Ellzey said in a Thursday press release.

Congress is reviewing a third aid package that could include stimulus checks and another extension of unemployment benefits. On Thursday, 110 congressional members sent a letter to President Donald Trump seeking an extension of benefits. In South Carolina,

low-income advocates are worried about what will happen when those benefits decrease. They predict a rise in evictions and hunger.

"It's not going to be good," S.C. Appleseed Legal Justice Center director Sue Berkowitz said.

THE ECONOMIC LINCHPIN

A recent national study found that with nearly one-third of the workforce with children at home, nearly 10 percent of economic activity is hampered while schools are closed. The Northeastern University research found parents were losing an average of eight hours of work per week with added child care duties.

"We can't be doing work and child care at the same time; it just isn't possible," Women's Rights and Empowerment Network CEO Ann Warner said.

The current recession has hit women particularly hard, Warner added. Women are often in face-to-face businesses, such as retail or food service, which were impacted by the work-or-home order. They also bear the brunt of child care, Warner said.

Finlay said continued school closures will be "a monster problem for parents."

"How do you deal with having a day job at the same time as having your

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children at home?" he said. He added that in his work with homeless families, often the biggest help in getting parents back to work is getting the child enrolled in school.

Trump vowed this week to pressure states to reopen schools to in-person instruction. The S.C. Department of Education appears to be allowing districts to formulate their own plans.

PEDIATRICIANS WANT SCHOOL TO START BACK UP, TOO

Pediatricians agree school needs to be restarted.

The Association of American Pediatrics released a statement June 26 encouraging schools to reopen since they provide "academic instruction, social and emotional skills, safety, nutrition, physical activity, and mental health therapy."

And children can be safer, too, since educators can help catch abuse or neglect. South Carolina's reports of child abuse or neglect have decreased since schools shuttered, and as of last week, schools have failed to contact 16,085 students statewide since in-person classes closed March 15.

S.C. pediatrician Deborah Greenhouse testified to the Senate select committee this week to support schools' reopening. She said there is evidence suggesting that not only are children less likely to contract COVID-19, but they are also less likely to carry and pass

on the virus to others. Still, she said, social distancing and masks at school will be needed.

But it isn't as easy as setting a start date in August, other medical experts warn.

"That risks not only infecting the children but the parents as well, which will ultimately harm the economy and overflow the hospital system," Clemson Public Health Sciences professor Lior Rennert said.

MASKS OFFER A SOLUTION, SOME SAY

The conclusion of many in Columbia is that for the economy to get healthy, people need to get back to work. For people to get back to work, children must return to school. And for children to return to school safely in a pandemic, South Carolina has to get control of the coronavirus.

"We're not going to get back to work as a state until our kids get back to school and we're not going to get our kids back to school until it's relatively safe" said Columbia Democratic Sen. Dick Hartpootlian, who serves on the Senate Re-Open South Carolina Select Committee.

Medical experts say beating the pandemic starts with masks and the potential for shuttering bars and ending indoor dining service. For several weeks now, local governments have enacted their own mask requirements and encouragements. But medical experts say a

statewide mask order is needed — something Gov. Henry McMaster has repeatedly said he will not do because of enforcement issues.

"South Carolina needs school in the fall. How do we get there? A statewide #maskmandate. Closing bars and indoor dining. Occupancy limits. Please make it happen, Governor," Greenhouse tweeted July 2. She reiterated that message July 8 before the Senate select committee.

Clemson's Rennert said without masks and enforcement, the virus will continue to spread.

"The first thing that the citizens of South Carolina should start doing is wearing masks when they are out in public, because it's not about the individual preventing the disease, more importantly it is about preventing the spread of the disease," he said.

WREN's Warner said South Carolina needs "to get the virus under control" first.

"Until we can do that, it's just unrealistic and it's dangerous to put kids back in school," she said.

Hartpootlian said mask-wearing is a budget-friendly way to get the economy back on track.

"There is no constitutional right to infect somebody," he said. "The governor, first of all, should issue the kinds of orders that are being issued in Florida and Texas and Ohio: Everybody should wear masks."

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