

US 'failing' on Covid: top health official

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With the United States recording its highest daily COVID case load in six months, a top public health official warned Sunday that the country is "failing" in its battle to keep the coronavirus in check.

A surge of the highly transmissible Delta variant has brought a slew of bad news in the United States, which already has the highest reported

death toll worldwide from COVID-19 at more than 616,000.

Total daily new cases have soared to 118,000, their highest level since February; deaths are up 89 percent over the past two weeks, even while slightly declining around the world; and children's hospitals in US states like Florida are being overwhelmed as young people are increasingly affected.

"We should not really have ever got to the place we are," Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, said on ABC's "This Week."

"In that regard, yes, we are failing."

Fears about the Delta variant have sparked a surge in vaccination rates, but millions, especially in conservative-leaning areas of the country, remain skeptical about getting the shot.

"We would not be in the place we are right now with this Delta surge if we had been more effective in getting everybody" vaccinated, Collins said.

"Now we're paying a terrible price."

Vaccine approval seen soon

Another top health official, infectious diseases expert Anthony Fauci, said final full approval of key vaccines from the federal Food and Drug Administration could come as early as this month—something some skeptics have said they need to hear before taking the plunge.

"I hope that it's within the month of August," Fauci told NBC's "Meet the Press."

For now, the coronavirus vaccines have been approved on an emergency use basis to counter the pandemic.

Fauci, who advises President Joe Biden on health matters, warned that failure to bring the Delta variant under control would increase the chances of a new variant emerging which "could be more problematic than Delta."

In a sign that fears are increasing about the surge in COVID cases, organizers of the New Orleans Jazz Fest announced Sunday that the event set to take place on October 8-17 had been canceled.

"In the meantime, we urge everyone to follow the guidelines and protocols put forth by public health officials," organizers said in a statement.

Children under 12 are not yet eligible for the vaccines, and Collins warned that if the millions of children soon returning to in-person schooling are not required to wear masks, the virus will "spread more widely."

"It will probably result in outbreaks in schools, and kids will have to go back to remote learning, which is the one thing we want to prevent," he said.

Battle over masks

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said Sunday on Twitter that even asymptomatic children can spread COVID-19, adding, "Children 2 years or older should wear masks in public indoor settings, including schools."

US Education Secretary Miguel Cardona on Sunday seconded that

advice.

"Let our education leaders lead," he said on CBS's "Face the Nation."

Yet in Florida, one of the states hardest hit by the latest surge, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis sparked a political furor when he issued an order barring the state's school districts from mandating mask-wearing.

But with hospitals in the state struggling under a fast-growing patient load, a handful of school districts said they would defy the order.

"Our children's hospitals are completely overwhelmed," Aileen Marty, an infectious disease expert at Florida International University, told CNN.

Collins, for his part, expressed exasperation that the debates over vaccine and mask-wearing had become politicized.

"This is not a political statement or an invasion of your liberties. This is a life-saving medical device," he said.

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