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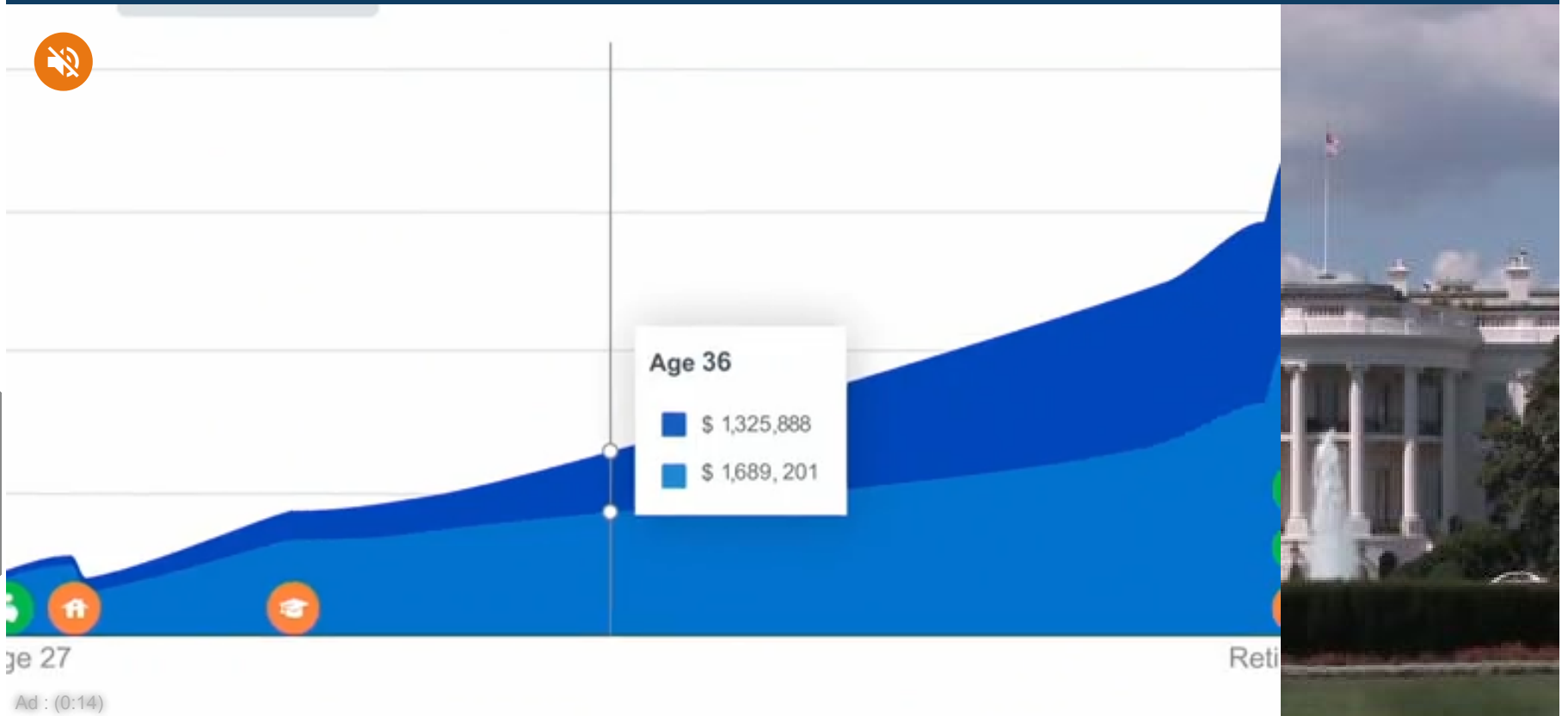
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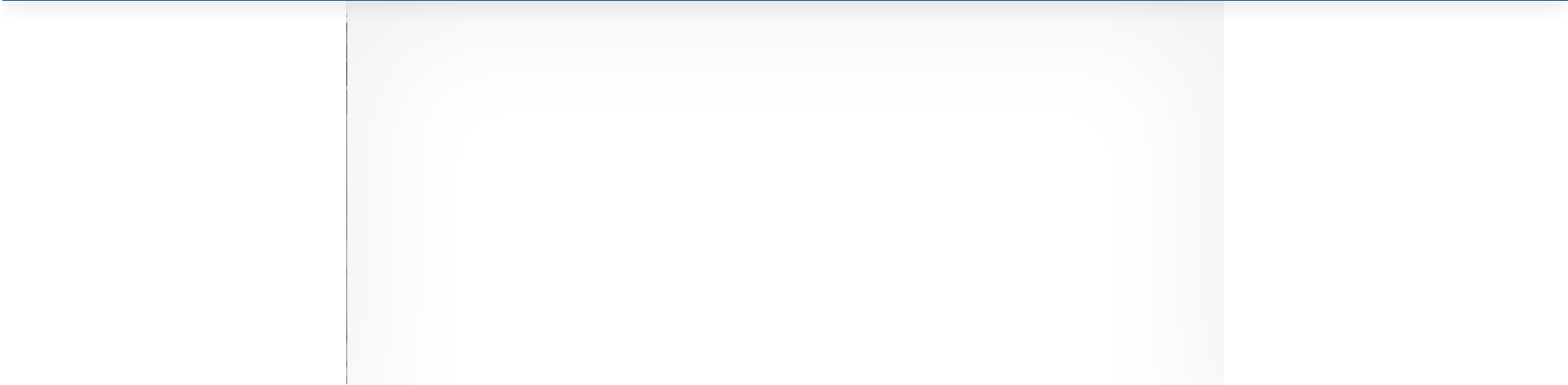
Delta-variant-fueled COVID infections have surged across Florida for [two months](#), putting the state at or near the top of states in new cases. And with schoolchildren having become pawns in an increasingly fought public health and political battle, DeSantis is facing a high-stakes rebellion from dozens of Florida school board members.

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Defying the governor’s wishes, orders and threatened punishments, school board members representing more than a third of Florida’s population have imposed mask mandates in their schools as they attempt to curb spread of the virus. On Friday, the brinkmanship continued, with DeSantis’ education commissioner [imposing financial penalties](#) on the first two rebellious school districts.

The school battle is attracting the most attention. But what’s happening now with DeSantis and Florida’s struggles with COVID could ultimately impact not only his political future, but the 2024 presidential contest. DeSantis has bet the house, gambling that his approach is the right one, or at least good enough to keep his supporters enthralled.

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### Parents’ views

The denouement may be far off, but many Floridians already have rendered their verdicts, with energized supporters and outraged foes.

“I think he is more concerned about his public image than the safety of our children,” wrote Jaye DeCapua, parent of two students at Western High School in Davie.

Melina Degelsmith, a Broward parent of three children, wrote that DeSantis is “playing a dangerous, political game with our children’s education and health.”

DeCapua, Degelsmith and dozens of other parents described at [SunSentinel.com](#) how they, and schools, are dealing with COVID-19 as the school year starts — and of the governor’s handling of the issue.

“Our children are just pawns in his quest to become president. He doesn’t care about Floridians or the children of this state. They are collateral damage. A fundraising opportunity. It’s abhorrent,” wrote Christie Bisbee, parent of a Palm Beach County kindergartner.

[RELATED: Poll finds two-thirds of Floridians support masks in school, but most favor letting parents make choice for their children »](#)

Talia Sampson, parent of a student at Jupiter Middle School, denounced the governor as a “terrible, callous

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Broward parent Natalie Lagos said her biggest concern is the possibility of her three children getting COVID. “I do not want them to remove the mask mandates. He’s tied local officials’ hands and made our children less safe.”

But even in Democratic-dominated South Florida, where the Broward, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach county school boards are among the five in the state that have mandated masks over DeSantis’ opposition, DeSantis’ approach has support.

“My biggest concern is that my child will continue to be forced to wear a mask,” wrote Stephen Duane, father of a first-grader. “Gov. DeSantis has been a steadfast and strong leader on this issue.”

Annie Cooper, parent of two at Hollywood Hills Elementary School, wrote that “I applaud him for trying to defend our parental and constitutional rights to make decisions for our children.”

## School fight

Three weeks ago, DeSantis signed an [executive order](#), entitled “Ensuring Parents’ Freedom to Choose,” designed to prevent mask mandates in schools. Guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend masking in schools as part of the strategy to prevent the spread of COVID.

As cases continued to rise and schools reopening, some school leaders rebelled against DeSantis’ position. He and his education commissioner have tried various efforts to cajole and threaten those who balked, but as of Friday, four of the state’s five largest urban school districts, districts, along with Alachua County, home to Gainesville and the University of Florida, had imposed mask mandates.

A [Florida Atlantic University poll](#) released Wednesday reported that 66% of Floridians agreed with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations that students, teachers and other staff should wear masks in school.

[RELATED: DeSantis education chief moves to penalize school board members over mask decisons »](#)

But the FAU poll also found that 51% of Floridians said parents should make the decision for their children.

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DeSantis this week sought to shift, at least slightly, the focus of the mask dispute. He said those who are flouting his policy on required masking aren’t defying him, but rather defying the state and its new “Parental Bill of Rights” law.

But once other big districts joined Broward and Alachua counties, the political calculus changed for DeSantis, said Mac Stipanovich, a longtime Florida Republican strategist who is now a no-party-affiliation voter

The expansion of the rebellion narrowed the governor’s options, he said. Backing down would be politically perilous for DeSantis, risking a disheartened political base. Stipanovich expects little beyond the call for financial penalties.

On Friday, DeSantis’ education commissioner ordered the withholding of state school aid to Broward and Alachua counties in the amount equivalent to the salaries of school board members who voted to impose mask mandates in their districts, contrary to the governor’s wishes.

On Friday, President Joe Biden’s education secretary, Miguel Cardona, spoke with Broward County interim school superintendent Vickie Cartright and the Alachua County superintendent, and told them, according to a White House statement, that they “can and should use federal pandemic relief funds to address any financial penalties levied against their districts” for following CDC guidelines, which include masking.

Stipanovich said the confrontation with the school boards “is the worst misstep that [DeSantis] has made as governor. He misread the situation and he woefully overplayed his hand. But it’s not a game-ending mistake,” he said

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## Surge and response

The summer surge from the delta variant put Florida at or near the top of various [COVID metrics](#).

For example, Florida had the nation’s third-highest seven-day COVID death rate as of Friday, [Becker’s Hospital Review reported](#). For the entire coronavirus pandemic, the [Kaiser Family Foundation reports](#), Florida was tied for 24th place among the states in per capita deaths.

Florida also ranks No. 24 in the percentage of the population age 18 and older that is fully vaccinated, according to a [New York Times database](#). DeSantis prefers to cite a different metric: Florida has the highest vaccination rate among southeastern states.

And he often asserts that the situation in other states will darken in coming months. On Friday, for example, he said there would be more demand for monoclonal antibody treatments in other states “in the fall and winter as you start to see delta surge in other parts of the country.”

[RELATED: ‘Bracing for the worst’ in Florida’s COVID hot zone »](#)

## DeSantis approach

DeSantis’ approach since early in the pandemic mirrored that of then-President Donald Trump, the man whose endorsement propelled DeSantis to the 2018 Republican gubernatorial nomination and the Executive Mansion. Both men emphasized individual responsibility and people making decisions for themselves about how best to avoid becoming sick — as opposed to following the recommendations of most public health experts — and prioritized keeping economic activity going.

DeSantis’ policies and style eroded some of the bipartisan support that polls showed him enjoying early in his governorship, ratcheted up the enmity from Democrats, and further endeared him to the MAGA movement, parts of the Republican Party base who supported Trump.

DeSantis has employed several approaches.

Most recently, he’s touted monoclonal antibody treatments, paid for by the federal government, at sites around the state. In recent days he visited Bonita Springs, Fort Walton Beach, Hudson, Orlando, Ormand Beach, Panama City, Pembroke Pines, and West Palm Beach. The only day he didn’t do one of the events was Tuesday, the day his schedule showed him traveling to Indianapolis for a Fraternal Order of Police national conference. The giant police union is an important constituency for a prospective presidential candidate.

[RELATED: Dick Farrel, longtime conservative radio host in Palm Beach County, dies of COVID-19. He had refused to be vaccinated »](#)

The appearances get him exposure on local news programs, showing him dealing with COVID. They also give him a chance to push back against Democratic critics who accuse him of sacrificing public health at the altar of a booming economy, and not doing enough to promote vaccination to help prevent people from contracting the virus as opposed to treating it after the fact.

And they show something other than his fight with school districts.

DeSantis sometimes offers extensive soliloquies, marshaling an array of facts he sees bolstering his approach.

DeSantis argues that his vaccination policies have been successful, touting the state’s best-in-the-South ranking and early promotion of vaccination among seniors, the most vulnerable to COVID. Seniors also arguably are the most important voting bloc in Florida.

This week he expressed some vaccine skepticism, noting that there’s evidence of increased infections among

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want them, saying he needed to see more evidence of their effectiveness.

## Presidential politics

Beyond his 2022 candidacy for re-election, DeSantis is a leading, though undeclared, candidate for his party’s nomination. And 2024 politics are constantly in the background.

There’s been constant back and forth between the governor and the Biden on a range of issues related to COVID.

On Thursday, for example, he [criticized the Biden administration’s order](#) that nursing home staff get vaccinated or lose federal Medicare and Medicaid funding as “a massive hammer that they’re trying to bring down.”

[RELATED: Democratic lawmakers and health advocates push plan to bypass DeSantis and Republicans who won’t expand Medicaid »](#)

Earlier in the week, at his Pembroke Pines monoclonal antibody stop, DeSantis decried what he said were “local officials who do not believe they need to follow the law. That’s what this is about. They are trying to posture it about me, because if you make it about me, you get on CNN.”

That evening, he appeared on the Fox News [“Hannity” program](#) declaring that Biden is “obsessed with having the government force kindergartners to wear masks all day in school.” He repeated that again Friday afternoon, saying the Biden administration wants to “kneecap” parental authority.

Larry Casey, a Republican strategist from Palm Beach Gardens who has managed congressional campaigns and run congressional offices, said the more the governor stands up to the president, the better it looks to his political base.

“DeSantis is using Biden as a bogeyman,” Casey said.

Like most politicians, DeSantis is offering what his political base wants, said Hans Hassell, a political scientist at Florida State University. “Governor DeSantis is not thinking about the democrats and the other people who are not going to vote for him no matter what,” he said.

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Starting with the 2000 presidential campaign, candidates have focused increasingly on doing what they can to increase interest and turnout among their base voters and less on trying to court supposed moderate swing voters in the political center, he said. “Turnout has become much more important than persuadable voters.”

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That’s even more important for someone like DeSantis. When politicians have ambitions for higher office, Hassell said, they start to focus on the constituency they’re going to have to court in the future. For DeSantis, that is 2024 Republican primary voters in other states.

Democrats see Republican primary politics as driving his COVID decisions.

“Here’s the fact: Our governor is running for president. He is playing to the Trump base. He is not governing this state. That is the bottom line,” U.S. Rep. Lois Frankel, a Palm Beach County Democrat, said this week.

And U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, a Broward/Miami-Dade county Democrat, said DeSantis’ top concern is “winning the Republican presidential primary in 2024 and trying to be the Trumpiest candidate in the field. So the only ones he cares about are the audience that is the most responsive to Trumpian policies like he has pushed. And the confrontational nature in which he’s pursued them.”

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Budd is Palm Beach County’s state Republican committeeman and president of a large Trump-inspired organization, Club 45 USA. He was an early DeSantis supporter, on hand [when DeSantis kicked off his campaign](#) for governor at 2018.

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“They’re getting in line earlier to attack him, to hurt him, to do whatever they can because I think the Democrats look at him as a presidential candidate that’s going to be a formidable force,” Budd said. “They see DeSantis as a real threat to take back the White House in 2024.”

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A [Susquehanna Polling and Research survey](#) released Wednesday reported DeSantis’ performance as governor was viewed positively by 52% of Florida voters, with 43% disapproving, a net positive of 9 points.

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Stipanovich and Casey said it’s far too early to assess the impact of the COVID surge and the school fight on either DeSantis’ re-election campaign or presidential prospects.

“Time is his friend here,” Stipanovich said. “The delta variant will peak. The infections will subside. ICU beds will free up. And there’s nothing more true about us Americans than how short our attention spans are.”

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