

State Funds For Classroom Supplies Won't Cover What Many Teachers Want Most: COVID-19 Basics

WLRN 91.3 FM | By [Jessica Bakeman](#)
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Teachers get money from the state to spend on their classrooms — but some pandemic must-haves are off limits.

Brigette Kinney spent \$230 on plexiglass dividers: One will shield her while she's sitting at her desk in her classroom. And the other is on wheels, tall enough for her to stand behind it while she's teaching English at Coral Gables Senior High School.

The personal protective equipment came out of Kinney's pocket. She had hoped she could pay for it with the few hundred bucks she gets every year for classroom supplies. But the Florida Teachers Classroom Supply Assistance Program has strict eligibility requirements, and equipment isn't an allowable purchase.

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Neither are cleaning supplies. She found that out because she was also hoping to buy disinfectant wipes.

"I'm going to have students coming in and sitting at a desk and touching things and then leaving. And then more students will come in and sit in those same desks," Kinney said. "And we're not allowed to spend our supply money on something to wipe down the desks. It just doesn't make any sense."

For weeks, Miami-Dade County public school teachers have warned their classrooms were not equipped with the tools necessary to keep them and their students safe while the coronavirus continues to spread — although district administrators argue schools are fully outfitted.

Teachers were temporarily relieved when the school board voted last week to push back reopening until mid-October. That decision followed a [29-hour meeting](#) that included 18 hours of streaming voicemail testimony from the public, with most commenters strongly opposing reopening schools.

But in a stunning turnaround, and under threat of losing tens of millions of dollars in state funding, the [school board committed Tuesday](#) to bring students back to classrooms starting Oct. 5.

Now, the infamous annual tradition of teachers spending their own money on their classrooms and students is playing out with a dark new twist: The supplies they want most are designed to mitigate the spread of infectious disease.

Kinney is one of several teachers at her school who asked for permission to use the funding for plexiglass dividers and disinfectant wipes and were denied, according to an email exchange between the school's principal and district finance personnel.

State [law](#) stipulates that the funds “are for classroom teachers to purchase ... classroom materials and supplies for the public school students assigned to them and may not be used to purchase equipment.”

More detailed [guidance](#) from local school districts lists examples of what's allowed — paper, pens, pencils, highlighters, books, art and crafts materials — and what's not — clothing, electronics, furniture, cleaning supplies.

A spokesperson for the Florida Department of Education did not respond to questions about whether state officials have considered providing temporary flexibility for how the money can be spent during the pandemic.

The current [state budget](#) includes about \$54.1 million for the supplement, and the amount per teacher varies by district. The allocation is \$336 for Miami-Dade teachers this year.

The prohibition against spending the funding on technology equipment presents another challenge during a crisis marked by an abrupt, and problematic, shift to virtual learning.

For example, Kinney bought a scanner for her home office, since she was no longer able to make photocopies of pages in books and distribute them to her students. Again, she spent her own money on it.

Kinney argued state policymakers should reconsider those restrictions “in a year where we have a large number of students who are going to be learning online, and teachers who are going to be relying on technology tools more than they ever have before.”

“It seems that they are not really sensitive to what teachers actually need,” she said.

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