



From the White House to the White Sands

Brian Blase

It's not easy to move a family with five kids. But, in January 2021, that's what my wife and I did. We moved from Fairfax County—a large county in Virginia, just west of the nation's capital—to Ponte Vedra Beach, a beautiful coastal community in northeast Florida. The response of our local government and schools to the pandemic was so extreme and anti-family that we

made the decision to uproot our lives and move where freedom and children are more highly valued.

A bit of background: my wife and I moved to Fairfax County right after we got married in the summer of 2004. We lived there for 16 years before we made the decision to move.

In retrospect, there were a lot of reasons

to move to Florida: no cold weather, no state income taxes, and a closer proximity to the beach. And those reasons would have made such a move worthwhile regardless of the pandemic.

Without the pandemic though, we never would have thought about moving. We had a great community with good friends, and our kids liked their schools and sports teams. And I thought it made sense for me to be near Washington since my career is focused on public policy. I've had the pleasure of serving at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, the U.S. Senate Republican Policy Committee, and ultimately with President Trump as Special Assistant to the President for Economic Policy at the National Economic Council.

At first, the pandemic didn't change our attitude toward our community. We felt like we were all in it together. All areas of the country were understandably concerned about the novel virus and seemed to be taking proper precautions at the time. And while the shuttering of schools and activities for our children was horrible for them and us, at least we could understand it.

However, some people like us were doing honest assessments and looking holistically at the benefits and costs of lockdowns—and considering everything that matters in life. It took only a few months to realize that the government response by locking kids in homes was a mistake. The harm to kids and young adults from being locked down was far greater than the societal benefit from doing so. In our town of Reston, the authorities padlocked tennis

courts for months, shut down public outdoor swimming pools, and put yellow police tape on the playground equipment at public parks.

What we found the most intolerable was the closure of the public schools. Again, we understood these actions for the first few months of the pandemic. But the data became clear about a few critical aspects: 1) the extremely low risk faced by kids to the virus, particularly those without any underlying medical issues, 2) the harms to kids from social isolation, and 3) the profound lack of learning in that accompanied virtual school options for many students. Once those realities became apparent, all efforts should have been made to open schools and get kids back to normal activities and socialization. Instead, fear continued to rain down on children. Kids no longer played outside with their friends and turned to endless hours on electronic devices to pass the time.

In the summer of 2020, Fairfax County's superintendent sent a survey to parents with two options—participate in virtual education only or utilize a hybrid arrangement with a few days a week in the school. We chose the latter. It wasn't an ideal choice for my wife and me because we thought kids should be going back full-time. Plus, our kids wanted to get back to school. Virtual school was a nightmare for them because they learned next to nothing and lost touch with friends and peers.

About half of parents chose the virtual option and about half the hybrid option. It turns out the parents' choices were to be disregarded. A few days after the survey closed, the superintendent announced that



the schools would be closed to start the school year. The teachers' unions were too powerful, and the school system caved to paranoia and fear, listening only to public health experts who were relying on flawed models and who lacked perspective.

After the superintendent's announcement, we began to consider moving to a more hospitable and rational part of the country. My family was more fortunate than most because moving was an option. When I had left my job at the White House in the summer of 2019, I had started my own policy organization. While most of my work centered on federal policymaking, it was not necessary for me to live in Washington for my business.

As we explored options, we listed a few priorities to help us decide where to move:

it had to be freer (the lack of a state income tax was a good indication of more freedom), it had to be warmer, the schools had to be good, and the neighborhood had to have an abundance of young families with children.

I put three states on my list: Florida, Tennessee, and Texas. In September 2020, my wife and I flew to Florida to check out the area between Jacksonville and St. Augustine. Everyone we met was friendly, and many people had made the move from northeastern states over the past few years. They had moved to not only enjoy the warmer weather, but also to escape the increasingly progressive and woke nature of their states, which made raising children so difficult. Not a single person we met told us that they regretted their move. It honestly seemed too good to be true but confirmed

to us that we should move.

Our oldest child was just starting eighth grade, and we wanted to move before he started high school. We did desire to move as soon as possible to get our kids back into school.

During the summer that year, we asked our rising 8th grader, 6th grader, and 3rd grader whether they wanted to continue with virtual learning through their school or for us to homeschool them. Since my wife and I knew that they were learning little through virtual school, we leaned toward homeschooling even though that meant we would need to develop a curriculum and vet and purchase materials. Our 6th and 3rd graders chose homeschooling.

Although there were often tears and “gnashing of teeth,” we did our best and they learned. Homeschooling was hard, but it was better than virtual school. A benefit of homeschooling is that parents can cover so much more material than a regular school does, and we were able to do interesting projects with our kids.

Our then 8th grader had chosen virtual learning but, only two months later, he told us that he was utterly frustrated and learning nothing. We withdrew him and homeschooled him, as well. Fortunately, we were able to find a preschool at a local church that was open for our younger children, so they were able to escape our home for a few hours a day. We remain grateful for that. It was crucial to have a few hours a day without the younger children, so we could focus on the education for the older kids. Oh, and during this time, like parents all over the country, we had our normal jobs to do too.

In early November, we bought a home

in Ponte Vedra and during the first week of January, we finally made the move from Virginia to Florida. It was difficult to pack up our house in Reston, but it was even more difficult for us to say goodbye to our friends and leave our community. On the other hand, we were excited for the adventure and to leave the lockdowns of Northern Virginia. We only get one life, and it's important to make changes from time to time. We looked forward to meeting new people, developing another loving community, and enjoying the outdoors the whole year.

A few days after our move to our new home, a yellow bus came down our street and picked up our kids for school. After ten long months since they were last in a school building, my wife and I cried as the bus pulled away.

The political leadership in Florida—for which Governor DeSantis deserves enormous credit—insisted that schools be open for the 2020-2021 school year. Florida prioritized kids and families, properly following the science and balancing the totality of considerations in life. Young families and kids in Florida were spared from so much scarring, including social isolation and loss of learning, that millions of other families and kids from across the country were forced to endure.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about 1,060,000 people moved from one state to another between the summer of 2020 and the summer of 2021. Of this group, Florida gained 220,000 more people than it lost. California and New York—two of the states with the most severe lockdowns—each had more than 350,000 people, on net, move to other states that year.

We've met many other families who endured the same trauma and turmoil as ours in locked down parts of the country and made the decision to relocate to this community because the local governments of their former homes had failed them. I recognize how lucky we were to have the ability and resources to do so.

This part of Florida is a great place to live. It's beautiful, with water everywhere and great weather. The schools are good, there are many amenities designed for families, and the people are kind and welcoming. While the pandemic was horrible, the

negative consequences of the government response to it in many parts of the country were just as bad if not worse than the virus itself. Like many others, we voted with our feet and moved to a place where the government response was sensible. We are thankful that we had Florida to move to.

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