



July 27, 2020

Statement on Reopening Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 cases in Indiana are climbing, coinciding with the planned beginning of our school year. Across our state, local school boards are faced with difficult decisions about how to educate children and serve their communities during a pandemic. Meanwhile, the [Trump administration wants our schools to move into full-bore reopening](#) and has [reframed guidance from the CDC to downplay safety protocols](#).

So far, Indiana has not issued specific metrics that could guide decisions about opening schools in person. Parents, teachers, and others are scrambling to read news reports and check coronavirus dashboards as they attempt to balance their desire to have children in school with the need to keep students, teachers, and staff safe.

In this ongoing emergency, we affirm:

1. **Safely returning to in-person education should be the goal of our school systems.** Children need relationships with their teachers and peers for their social and emotional health, just as they need the academic structure and inquiry of their classrooms. But children also need their families and their teachers. The benefits of in-person learning need to be weighed against the potential for spreading illness among children, their caregivers, and school personnel.
2. **Online interaction is a weak substitute for in-person education.** Because of differences in families' access to wi-fi, technology, and space at home to work and play, online education tends to amplify inequities.
3. **Teachers must feel safe in their schools.** They must be participants in the development of plans for school buildings, and those plans should be required by the state to meet specifications laid out by public health experts and/or the state of Indiana. Teacher safety also means that teachers who fall into high-risk categories, or who are caregivers for others at high risk, should be given the option to teach virtually.
4. **The prevalence of COVID-19 in a community is out of schools' control and has a direct impact on whether schools can open in a way that supports community health.**

THEREFORE:

1. We call on Governor Holcomb, the State Department of Health, and the Indiana Department of Education to **issue clear guidance developed with epidemiologists and public health experts** on:

- a. The metrics that would show when it is safe to open schools according to local conditions. Is it a certain raw number of cases, or a rate per 100,000? Is it declining cases over a period of several weeks? Is it a certain positivity rate or lower? (New York has specified an average rate of 5% over two weeks before schools may open.) Similarly, we need to know the metrics that would indicate that schools should be closed.
 - b. The procedures to be implemented in schools if a child or a member of a child's family is found to be infected, including testing and contact tracing, disinfecting of the space, who requires isolation, and what impact HIPAA will have on communications to families.
 - c. Gradual, phased reopening for cohorts of students.
2. We call on the Indiana Department of Education to **identify categories of children who should receive priority to be offered in-person education**. For example, even if we are again in lockdown as a state, it might be that schools could offer in-person education to children of essential workers and children with high special needs. Among other countries, [France](#) and the [UK](#) have done this.
 3. We call on our governor and on the federal government to **provide the funding that will allow our schools to open safely**, with more certified teachers, social workers, and counselors; with small class sizes; with adequate space, safety equipment, and cleaning supplies; and with healthy ventilation and outdoor education space.
 4. We call on our governor and State Board of Education to **cancel standardized testing** and to spend the money saved on urgent school needs. Nothing will be standard about testing conditions this year.
 5. We call on our government to **make sure that workers are supported so that they can maintain employment** while balancing their roles as caregivers and employees.
 6. We call on local political leaders and community authorities in both public and private health to **collaborate and support our schools** as we navigate this reopening.

School is crucial to our children's development as citizens, seekers of knowledge, and people who care for others and for their world. Childhood is brief and matters exponentially. Our state must do what is necessary to constrain this virus and bring infections steadily down so that our children, teachers, and staff can safely go back to school.

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