

Attendance at School During Coronavirus Pandemic

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There has been much debate and varying opinion about school closures, hybrid models, remote learning, and what is best for our children and community. There is much that remains unknown with all aspects of this virus, and this makes decisions about schooling difficult. Although we assume that the people making decisions about in-school vs. hybrid vs. full remote learning models have our children's best interest in mind, parents should be very involved in the planning and the decision-making process for their children. This is critical to ensure that children's best interests continue to be represented. Parents have had to make major adjustments in order to be most efficient and to maximize their efforts in educating their children. We wish to applaud these efforts, while we try to stay informed.

We should start with what we DO know to date about schools and coronavirus. To date, schools have NOT been shown to have created significant spread of disease. Children in grades Kindergarten through 8th seem to have been spared from serious disease from the coronavirus. There is also some evidence that if children carry the virus, they tend to shed less of it to their contacts. These data are world-wide, with most of this research outside of the U.S.A. We also know that some students do just as well in a virtual or remote learning environment as they do in a classroom environment; however, emerging data on grammar and high school students indicates that the number of students receiving failing grades is very troublesome. The option of virtual learning should be available to parents, even though the majority of parents express the opinion that the "at home learning experience" is much less effective for their children than the "in-school experience". We have also learned that students with special needs, and those in lower socio-economic groups, seem to have the most setbacks with remote learning.

Since we have NOT lived through this pandemic long enough to know what the final outcomes will be, there remains concern that schools could become a place where "disease spreads". There are genuine questions and concerns about PPE (masks, gloves) for students and staff, and sufficient space necessary for physical distancing. There are budgetary concerns for these issues as well, including supplies and cleaning protocols. Parents should stay involved with all of these discussions and decisions.

Unfortunately, we also have experience with, and data showing, a large increase in mental health issues, both with students with existing mental health diagnoses, and with the number of new students presenting with symptoms. It is difficult to quantify what is directly related to social deprivation from school settings; but reports indicate that this is a major factor. Also, the dependence on screen time has certain challenges that go beyond school. All students have needed to increase reliance on screen time / social media to stay connected socially. This is better than no socialization. There is significant research that shows, however, that the use of screens for socialization can lead to addictive patterns. The developing brain, per psychiatrists, can re-organize over time; and increased use can lead to children, adolescents, and young adults craving the “next screen view”. There are also studies to support that teens who use social media, without a 1-2 hour daily break from their phone, have a 50% higher “stress level”, as measured by survey & blood tests (stress cortisol/hormone levels).

It is important to stress some positive ways that parents can make the best of the situation for their children. We can reassure them that these changes are temporary. We can inform them of some silver linings that are created from being home for education and socialization; these would include increase in quality family time and fun outdoor play with exercise.

So, it remains very difficult for those who must decide how and when schools will be open. The concerning part about these decisions, is that the recent decision to close schools was based on concerns related to the increased community spread of disease. This decision should be questioned. We need to ask for clear reasons for this decision, as the PPE, distancing, and budgetary concerns do not seem to apply. The uncertainty of “what we don’t know” certainly does play a role; but the NYS decision that a certain percentage of the population having positive results should be the indicator, seems to have no support other than the “fear of the unknown” and requirements suggested by the teachers’ unions.

We must all be aware that the CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics never recommended that schools be closed in any way. They have supported that PPE, distancing, and budgets play a role in controlling the virus in educational settings; but neither of these groups have set any guidelines about school closures based on the number of positive cases in our communities.

We understand the difficulty for those in positions of authority to make these decisions; but parents need to be involved, and ask the right questions, every step of the way. This latest decision to close schools, due to increased cases of the virus, should lead to careful questioning about how these decisions are made, and what is in the best interest of our children! We advise that parents try to immediately try to contact their state legislature and other elected officials to review important questions with the expectation of clear answers.