June 24, 2020

PA Department of Education Releases "Considerations for Reopening Pennsylvania Schools"

The Pennsylvania Department of Education contracted with the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory to produce a research report examining issues related to reopening schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The report, *Considerations for Reopening Pennsylvania Schools*, provides information in three important areas: 1) current research on public health and education issues related to reopening schools in the pandemic; 2) concerns of public school stakeholders about reopening schools; and 3) the potential for COVID-19 viral exposure of students and staff under various school reopening scenarios. The information contained in this report may be useful to districts completing their Health and Safety Plans for school reopening in the 2020-21 school year.[1] To assist educators engaged in reopening planning, this *...in Brief* summarizes key findings of the report.

Evidence about Public Health and Education Issues Related to Reopening Schools

To determine the impact of pandemic-related education disruptions and potential reopening on students, staff, and families, the report examines research about the viral risk to children and adults, effective viral mitigation practices, and the impact on students of prolonged school closures and remote learning related to COVID-19.

Although research about the virus is still emerging, the authors conclude that the virus seems to present a relatively low risk to most children. However, open school buildings could be centers of community transmission which may place educators, family members, and other community members at greater risk. Hygiene practices such as masking, social distancing, cleaning, ventilation, meeting outdoors, and hand washing can significantly reduce the risk of transmission, but their implementation may not always be practical in school.

Prolonged school closures have likely led to significant learning loss among students, particularly among younger students, low income students, and Black and Latinx students. Online classes are typically less effective than in-person classes, and lower achieving students typically are less successful in online classes than their higher achieving classmates. These differences in the effectiveness of online learning are likely to exacerbate existing inequities among students. In cases where online learning is necessary, educators can improve student outcomes by ensuring that all students are engaged in online learning, online learning includes synchronous interactions between students and teachers, online and classroom work are well-integrated, online lessons include frequent formative assessment, and online instruction integrates hands-on activities, discussion, and collaboration.[2]

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[1] See PSEA's Advisory "PA Department of Education Issues Preliminary Guidance for Phased Reopening of Pre-K to 12 Schools" for additional information about Pennsylvania's Health and Safety Plan requirements for schools.

[2] PSEA offers several professional learning courses related to distance education. To view course options, please visit PSEA's Center for Professional Learning.

Overall, any decision to reopen schools must balance what is known about the most effective health and safety practices to reduce viral transmission against potential learning losses and other negative consequences for students of extended school building closures.

Concerns and Needs of Public School Stakeholders Related to Reopening Schools

Researchers completed interviews with 18 stakeholders representing school districts, charter schools, intermediate units, state education associations, parents and family members, community members, and public health experts. Interviewees expressed concerns about logistics, educational programming, and public health impacts related to reopening public schools. Concerns raised by interviewees include the following.

- ***Protective Measures for Staff and Some Students.*** Although the risk COVID-19 presents to most children is relatively small, stakeholders recognized the need to protect both students and staff who are medically fragile or have other have risk factors.
- ***Student Transportation.*** Stakeholders expressed concern about safely transporting students to and from school. Physical distancing on buses with a full complement of riders is not practical. In reality, many families may be reluctant to place children on buses; as a result, car traffic around schools may increase.
- ***Efficacy and Logistics of Health Screenings.*** Interviewees were concerned that health screening equipment may be expensive, that screening may require significant staff time, that schools may not be able to screen large numbers of students rapidly, and that large-scale screening will miss asymptomatic students and staff which will decrease efficacy of the intervention.
- ***Impact of Social Distancing on Instruction.*** Respondents were aware that physical distancing among students and staff would require substantial changes to instruction, scheduling, and use of space in schools. Physical distancing will be harder among younger students and in schools that are already at or near capacity. In some cases, schools may be able to use outdoor space to increase social distancing, but this may be difficult in urban areas and could be disrupted by weather and other outdoor conditions.
- ***Feasibility of Prolonged Mask Usage.*** Interviewees expressed some concerns about prolonged use of masks, particularly in classes with young children. In addition, respondents anticipated that some families may resist mask usage. Finally, respondents described challenges related to teaching with masks on, particularly among students with disabilities who may rely on reading lips and/or facial expressions. In these cases, educators may need to use face shields instead of masks.

Finally, interviewees outlined challenges related to continued use of remote learning in 2020-21. These include inequitable access to devices and broadband; challenges in measuring student attendance; the need for targeted professional learning and high-quality online educational platforms; and a focus on social and emotional wellness for socially-isolated students adjusting to a new school year during the unpredictability of the pandemic.

Scenarios for Reopening Schools and Estimates of Viral Spread

The report concludes by examining seven different reopening scenarios and determining the likelihood of viral spread in each of the scenarios. The scenarios include options for daily attendance of all students and for rotating attendance so that students attend school in-person for one day a week, two days a week, or four days a week. In addition, models including varying levels of mitigation efforts to reduce viral spread.

Although any reopening is likely to lead to higher infection rates among students and educators, specific reopening scenarios and mitigation efforts can substantially decrease this impact. Researchers conclude that the most effective model to reduce viral transmission in school brings 20 percent of students into school one day each week and provides distance learning for the remaining four days. In this model, staff can more effectively institute appropriate social distancing on buses and in school. In addition, infected students are more likely to present symptoms at home and not carry the virus into school.

Applicability of the Report to School Reopening Planning in Pennsylvania.

This report is intended to support school districts and other education entities as they plan to reopen buildings for the 2020-21 school year. The report is informational only, and no education entity is required to adopt any recommendations included in the report. School entities are required to follow the Governor's reopening plan which establishes different requirements for schools in counties designated as in Green, Yellow, or Red Phase of pandemic response. For additional information about planning and implementation requirements related to school reopening, see PSEA's Advisory, *PA Department of Education Issues Preliminary Guidance for Phase Reopening of Pre-K to 12 Schools*.

For More Information

For additional information about school reopening requirements and recommendations in Pennsylvania, PSEA members can contact PSEA's Education Services Department at professionallearning@psea.org. PSEA members with specific questions or concerns about school reopening plans in their district should contact their local union leadership or their PSEA UniServ Representative.