

Op-Ed on Return-to-School

PA's Schools Should Not Take the Blame for Reopening Challenges Pennsylvania Association of School Administrator

by Dr. Mark DiRocco

With just weeks to the start of a new school year, Pennsylvania's public school districts find themselves under siege, facing extreme public pressure and scrutiny, as they furiously plan for how to safely reopen schools. It's a fight they shouldn't have to wage alone. They're calling on the state's leaders to support them and the 1.7 million students they educate as we move into the next phase of the pandemic.

Amidst a backdrop of rapidly changing guidance and direction, school superintendents have spent the summer leading their districts through an emotionally charged public discernment process – one many of them feel was unfairly put upon their districts. While the state has emphasized a need for local decision-making, school leaders have questioned time and again why decisions about public health have been placed in the hands of educators.

Perhaps the most frustrating decision point has been the conflicting and nebulous guidance schools have been given about social distancing. Numerous reports suggest 6 feet as the gold standard, but schools have been told to use this guidance "when feasible," forcing many to consider whether 4 or 5 feet is "good enough" to bring schools back at full capacity. As school districts have debated whether to use 'hybrid models' that would allow that distancing by reducing capacity (meaning students would not be able to attend school every day), their communities have anxiously voiced serious concerns about child care and the practicality of these plans.

Schools have also struggled with liability concerns. If a student or staff member contracts Covid during the school year, is the district responsible for this illness? This question has led many leaders to consider whether a virtual opening would be a better choice. But, numerous organizations have urged an in-person return, noting the importance of face to face education, especially for special education students. School leaders have whip lash, as they're pushed and pulled in multiple directions by guidance that changes every few weeks or even days, and by communities that are increasingly polarized. They are facing unprecedented responsibilities and decisions – ones that would be better answered by epidemiologists and medical doctors. Ultimately, unless 'hold harmless' legislation is passed, school districts and their boards may have to shoulder at least some of the blame if things go poorly.

The costs associated with the pandemic have left most districts staring down budget deficits that will wreak havoc on their financial bottom line for years to come. Schools have purchased more devices, masks and face shields, online curriculum programs, and many have hired more teachers to accommodate their online and in-person requirements of a socially distanced school.

When schools were first shuttered in March, most did not expect we'd be facing months of nationwide quarantine and closures. Many students didn't have devices or internet, and many teachers had limited experience teaching online. Schools rapidly innovated, turning their educational models upside down in a matter of weeks to provide online instruction for all. Some of the state's more affluent, suburban districts adapted fairly quickly, while many rural and urban districts where internet is spotty and funding is always a concern struggled with a myriad of connectivity and engagement issues. The divides that already exist in our state only widened. Now, they are poised to grow even further apart.

As our districts open in a myriad of different ways, parents and teachers are left wondering who is looking out for their children. In the face of a nationwide pandemic, few are stepping up to acknowledge that our school districts are facing an Apollo-13 level crisis. We've got hours to figure out how to get it right, or else the lunar module won't return safely. There are few good answers, few good plans or models, unclear and conflicting guidance, and no one feels great about the start of school.

Simply put, our public schools have been unintentionally set up for failure.

We must do better. We must stand behind our public schools and create better supports. If school re-openings are less than ideal, schools should not be blamed. We must adequately fund them, provide clear direction, offer strong support, and find a way to move forward, collectively.