



Morris County Council of Education Associations, Inc.

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July 31, 2020

Dr. Allen-McMillan,

Much controversy remains over the status of public schools, especially with regard to re-opening our buildings for the 20-21 school year. The Morris County Council of Education Associations (MCCEA), which represents more than 10,000 members from 41 school districts, cannot support any plans that require face-to-face instruction with students in September. MCCEA members, which includes certificated staff as well as support personnel, have participated in reopening committees in our districts. It's interesting that most of those meetings were held virtually, including the Board of Education meetings that approved the resulting plans. We all agree that in-person learning is preferred, but only when it is safe for students, staff and the communities we serve. Several concerns remain, making it apparent that health and safety cannot be guaranteed, which be our top priority. Additionally, the plans that have been made public do nothing to stimulate a child's interest in learning or address social and emotional needs. This is not education.

It is not feasible to expect that some of our schools will be able to comply with recommended building regulations. Many of our buildings do not have adequate ventilation systems. Some classrooms do not have windows that open to promote air flow. Some of our buildings, especially older ones, have narrow hallways, making social distancing during class changes impossible. While staff members have worked diligently over the summer to make more room in classrooms and disinfect our schools, it is unlikely that this process will be able to keep up with the demand once students return to school. In many districts, precautions have been taken to disinfect between classes; however, this process will likely result in students waiting in the hallway for the process to be completed. We have growing concerns about the feasibility of carrying out sanitization plans and the increased risk to our custodial staff. At least one district has reported that they will not disinfect between classes at all. This is not education.

The school experience for children will be nowhere near what they are used to and will present many challenges. Districts are encouraging parents to build up mask stamina in their children. At the start of the school year, many of our schools contain classrooms that are overwhelmingly hot. Going through the school day in these conditions while wearing a face covering will undoubtedly impact a child's ability to focus and to succeed on schoolwork. Most plans have reported that students will not be allowed to work in groups or share materials. They will not be permitted to work closely or in groups, assist each other or console a friend. As educators, we know that these provisions are against everything we know about best practices. Furthermore, it may be rather distressing for students to witness a friend in crisis and be told they may not help.

How will we ensure that all students have access to school materials? How is this an appropriate setting for raising caring students? Most districts plan to offer an alternating schedule of some sort. Some plans call for students to remain in one location for the duration of the day, some without lunch periods. While some plans call for students to attend related arts classes in a different location, questions remain whether or not there is a safe way for students to get there. Staggering class times to control traffic flow may be necessary; however, this cuts down on class time considerably. Having teachers travel to students to teach off a cart is a logistical nightmare, especially where stairs are prohibitive. This is not education.

There has been inadequate thought into accommodating age or ability-appropriate expectations. Young students and students with diverse needs may not be capable of adhering to these guidelines. Remaining in the same space without room to move is not conducive to learning- for anybody. But for some, it is impossible. Children naturally gravitate toward each other and toward caring adults. Can they be expected to adhere to their 6-foot "safe place" at all times? How hurtful will it be to tell a child they cannot hold their best friend's hand or deny them the reassuring hug they may need? This is not education.

While Morris County COVID 19 cases have remained rather stable, we have not seen the eradication expected with the summer months. Additionally, there has been a rise in coronavirus cases in many states that have relaxed safety precautions. We are not talking just about Florida, Texas and Arizona- they have been known hot spots. But our neighbors to the south, the previously identified "safe states" of Delaware and Maryland have been added to the risk list and that is a cause for concern. Additionally, both Massachusetts and Connecticut have identified recent cases related to camp and sport practices - outdoor activities deemed safe. In New Jersey, concerns of outbreaks due to attendance at parties where CDC guidelines were not followed have also been reported. This has led to further concerns over beach-going families and everyone in our communities with whom the infected persons have come in contact. Most recently, COVID 19 cases being identified in professional sports is further evidence of the virus being easily spread in groups- socially distanced, protected or otherwise.

What we all agree on is that the coming year will be very different than in years past. We disagree with how we can offer the best education for our students with the least negative impact on the physical and mental health of our school communities, and MCEA members do not have confidence in the guidance provided by the State Department of Education. The absence of a comprehensive, unified reopening procedure has left many without care for their own children and may lead to a teacher shortage come September. Not only will we contend with a teacher shortage, but what happens when our already strained custodial staff gets sick? We rely upon these professionals to ensure the safety of students. A lack of custodial staff will lead our communities to believe that preventative measures taken to deep clean will provide safety for their children. Plans that include broadcasting and or videotaping of classes in session are in direct violation of students' rights and contradict most Board policies.

We all want to get back to our classrooms and get back to normal with all the lessons, activities, field trips, and rites of passage. But let's be honest, there are too many remaining unanswered questions about the risks of reopening. We cannot guarantee the safety of our students, staff or the communities we serve therefore, districts must plan for virtual openings in September following the lead of the County College of Morris. The remaining summer weeks should be spent preparing how educators can best deliver that instruction rather than anguish over reopening plans that may be voided within days, which would be even more disruptive and detrimental to our students' learning. In the long run, this reality-driven approach will do much more to provide a stable educational environment for our students. This also allows

policymakers time to solve societal issues such as bridging the digital divide and working parents with childcare issues. The Willingboro Board of Education in Burlington County just voted to have remote learning exclusively for the first quarter of the upcoming school year in order to ensure the health and safety of students, school employees and their families. We should all be following their example and implement this model as a state, as it is undoubtedly the most prudent and measured approach to take at this juncture.

Sincerely,



President,
Morris County Council of Education Associations

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