

SFMMMS Principles for the Reopening of In-Person Schools Closed Due to COVID-19

Background

Reopening schools safely has become one of the most controversial issues of the COVID-19 pandemic. The question is how to best balance the health and educational needs of students, teachers, parents, and the broader population. As physicians, we believe that such a balance can be obtained via careful, data-based procedures and practices. The input of all parties must be obtained and considered in doing so. All of us share the same goals of doing what is best for children, and the San Francisco Marin Medical Society (SFMMMS) offers this document of principles in that spirit.

It can be difficult to find reliable information about whether and how to reopen schools, as media, policymakers, and organized labor associations issue conflicting statements and guidance. This document is intended to provide clarity on the issue from an evidence-based perspective and with a priority on the health and well-being of children and their communities. SFMMMS believes that schools are at least as essential as businesses that have already qualified to resume routine operations and **as an essential service, more needs to be done at all levels of state and local government to ensure robust delivery of safe, in-person school to our communities.**

The argument in favor of reopening schools is informed by factors relating to infection/transmission in children, education as a social determinant of health, economic contributions, and the disproportionate effects of school closures on communities of color.

- Children are not as susceptible to COVID-19 infection and/or transmission. Data is early but there is generally a consensus that children, as a rule, don't get as sick, don't get sick as often, and current evidence suggests that elementary school-aged children (i.e. younger than 10 years old) are much less likely to transmit the virus than older youth or adults.
- Being in school is arguably the most important health driver in children in the age of COVID-19. Factors include:
 - **Educational instruction:** Education is a social determinant of health. Educational loss and gaps lead directly to future economic stability and success which trends with health status.
 - **Social and emotional health:** Schools provide a stable and secure environment for children to develop social skills and peer relationships. A school environment where children feel safe and connected is associated with less depression and anxiety.
 - **Nutrition:** Vital meals are served at schools, which may be the only healthy food that some children receive in a day.
 - **Support for children with special health and educational needs:** Many specialized services are provided within the school setting.
 - **Health services:** Health care services are provided within the school setting, and for many children schools are the primary setting in which they receive health services.

- **Safety - Reduction of child abuse and decrease in risk-taking behaviors:** There is evidence that child abuse and neglect, which killed more than COVID in the pre-COVID period, increases when kids are not out of the house and in times of economic stress. In addition, time in school is associated with less sexual activity and substance use.
- **Physical activity:** Loss of physical activity associated with school closure can be particularly harmful to children as it is associated with childhood obesity.
- Schools are vital for our current and future economic success:
 - The adult supervision of children provided in schools is vital for economic productivity. This especially impacts women of all professions, including physicians and other staff in the health care setting.
 - Educational losses for this entire generation will have a negative 'ripple effect' on our local, state, and national economies far into the future.
- The negative effects of school closures are amplified and worsened for poor and Black and brown children, intensifying the disparities that already exist in our country.
 - Schools in these communities have been historically underfunded and overcrowded, and often lack basic materials and services including even soap and paper towels.
 - These are communities in which both adults and children suffer higher rates and worsened outcomes from COVID-19.

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- Reopening schools for in-person instruction when safe is vital for the health of children, families, and the short- and long-term economic health of our communities. For these reasons, schools should be considered at least as essential as those businesses that have already qualified to resume operations.
- As an essential service, elected and public health officials should prioritize schools over other types of non-essential businesses when making reopening decisions and allocating funds.
- School closures have a negative and disproportionate effect on women and people of color, including but not limited to reduced labor force participation. School attendance is critical to minimizing health and socioeconomic disparities in our society.
- Continued use of stringent control methods to lower community transmission rates so that schools can reopen with an acceptable level of safety should be of utmost priority for public health and other elected officials.
- Decisions regarding school reopenings should be made based on the best evidence available, recognizing that new evidence will emerge over time. During school reopening, robust surveillance, testing and data collection must be supported in order to prioritize student, staff and community safety and to inform future efforts in keeping educational and childcare institutions open.
- School districts will require substantial financial support to reopen safely and we urge public officials to prioritize this in their spending plans.
 - We urge governments and schools to invest significant resources into making virtual learning as robust and as effective as possible for all students who

- cannot safely return to school, including ensuring that all students have internet access and access to devices needed to participate in virtual learning.
- We recognize that extensive additional and targeted resources will need to be put into communities that have been historically underfunded and therefore are at risk for increased learning gaps and health and educational disparities, including communities of Black and brown children, as well as children with special health care needs.
 - Tactical guidance and engineering controls developed at the local level are essential for schools as they reopen. Local, county, and state policymakers should convene multidisciplinary task forces comprised of experts from the fields of health and education to assist in crafting such guidance.
 - Adequate types, usage, and quantities of personal protective equipment, including but not limited to masks, sanitizing gels and sprays, are essential to resuming the operations of schools.

Additional considerations:

- We urge officials to support research into educational outcomes with a focus on minimizing disparities in educational supports and outcomes. Future decisions and work in both in-person and distance learning should continue with the goal of narrowing disparities while holding high educational expectations and standards for all students.
- We urge elected and public health officials to engage in specific and nuanced decision-making when mandating how and when schools can open, and to recognize the following:
 - Opportunities exist to reopen elementary schools that may not exist for other types of schools because of the lower risk of viral infection or transmission by young children.
 - The risk for opening schools is different across the state and even within counties. Given the importance of reopening schools, decision-makers should use targeted and nuanced metrics to inform recommendations around school openings. Local county task forces to include county superintendents, teachers, public health leaders, physicians, and parents should be convened to help guide these openings.
 - An incremental approach to reopening schools has immense value. Starting at the elementary school level may allow policymakers to test policies in a lower-risk environment; refine the template for reopening; gain operational experience and develop best practices; and gather data to inform future opening decisions. What is learned because of incremental school reopening will benefit and accelerate reopening elsewhere.