Public Health Data Needs to Guide the Safe Reopening of Our Schools

Creative Thinking on School Reopening is Necessary to Prioritize Safety and Student Well-Being

By Council Member Mark Treyger, Chair of the Committee on Education

The stakes are incredibly high for the school year ahead. The rollout of remote learning has exacerbated pre-existing inequities in our education system.\(^1\) Our students, especially our most vulnerable children, lost out on instructional time. Working parents, particularly working mothers, have been forced to balance childcare, education, and their jobs.\(^2\) Our delayed shutdown exposed school staff to unacceptable risk. We know that there can be no genuine reopening without reopening schools, but the long term crises of underfunding, overcrowded schools, and large class sizes hamper our ability to do so safely. Executives have insisted that schools must develop reopening plans.\(^3\) The CDC and the New York State Department of Health have issued preliminary guidelines for safe school reopening.\(^4,5\) The New York City Department of Education has preliminarily released guidance to school leaders regarding space utilization and programming options.\(^6\) However, none of the reopening plans adequately rise to the impossibility of the situation we find ourselves in.

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School reopening decisions and protocols must be driven by public health and safety considerations, not politics. We have paid a heavy price for missteps in the lead up to school closure. The Department of Education learned from those early lessons, and has been operating Regional Enrichment Centers (RECs) with little incident, thanks to robust health screening procedures, small class sizes and social distancing, ample personal protective equipment, and regular deep cleaning. The safety protocols of the RECs should be instructive for the year ahead. School reopening cannot occur without having proper safeguards in place to protect our school communities and their families. Yet, the safety guidance and best practices which have been promulgated do not account for the space and staffing constraints of an educational system that has been plagued by systemic disinvestment for decades. The educational system cannot possibly open fully and safely for in-person instruction for all students.

The DOE has set strict social distancing guidelines, which will mean that only 1/2 or 1/3 of a school's students will be able to attend in-person at any one time, with the option for school leaders to propose alternative plans, if need be. Parents, educators, and advocates have all voiced their concerns about the DOE’s plan. The DOE proposal, which attempts to deal equally with all students and schools under constrained resources, will end up exacerbating the inequities that have come to a head under remote learning. Working families will still need to negotiate impossible childcare situations, older siblings who have assumed the childcare burden for parents working outside the home will still have those responsibilities, and the students who most depend on the stability of in-person instruction—young students, students in temporary housing and crowded living situations, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners—will not have that stability.

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We are in unprecedented times, and trying to replicate our standard educational system with minor adjustments will harm students, families, and staff—this is a time that requires exceptional creativity, cross-sector partnerships, and appropriate resources. We must think outside the box. In consultation with several school leaders, parents, colleagues, and advocacy organizations, I have developed the following suggestions for reopening schools in a way that minimizes harm and maximizes safety. The proposals in this document, presented for consideration and dialogue, are resource-intensive ways to reopen school in a safer and more just manner, based on what we know now. However, even the existing safety guidelines will likely require significant additional funding to implement, at a time when the City and State are in a fiscal crisis.\textsuperscript{10,11}

If we do not invest aggressively in safety and equity at the front-end, we will assuredly end up paying for it on the back-end, as certain students fall farther behind, parents contend with the costs of childcare relative to wages, economic recovery is delayed, and, as too many school systems have experienced, there might be a need to close down schools again when cases rise. We need substantial federal funding to be directed to local education authorities, and we cannot reopen without it. As we advocate for additional funding, with under two months until the next school year, it is imperative that the City, State, and Federal governments work together to ensure that we get this right. The following proposals should be seriously considered, before reopening plans move any further in the process:

- **Timing:** The school year should begin later in the fall to allow for the NYC Department of Education and schools to fully plan and program a safe reopening. With ambiguity around federal funding unlikely to be resolved before August, and rising case rates throughout much of the country, New York City would benefit from additional time to plan, and respond to

\textsuperscript{11} The City Council has requested an analysis of the cost of re-opening safely from the Independent Budget Office
changes in funding and public health guidance. Where providers are willing, contracts for summer enrichment programming should be extended and expanded, and childcare should be made available.

- **Safety and Contagion:** The DOE must strictly adhere to the CDC and New York State Health Department guidance for reopening schools. This includes requiring that everyone wears face coverings and maintains six feet of physical distance in school buildings, training students and staff on proper hand and respiratory hygiene, developing routines for frequent cleaning and disinfection, increasing circulation of outdoor air by opening windows and doors as much as safely possible, upgrading ventilation systems including in school cafeterias and kitchens, and conducting daily health screenings. The CDC recommends smaller class sizes so that desks can be spaced six feet apart.\(^\text{12}\) There must be widespread access to testing with rapid results, clearly defined protocols for self-reporting cases, and immediately closing buildings where self-reported cases have occurred. There must also be widespread access to personal protective equipment, disinfecting materials, hand washing stations and sanitizer, and sufficient funding to execute rigorous, daily deep-cleaning and disinfection. Additionally, there must be at least one full-time nurse per school site. As articulated by Governor Cuomo, if the city’s COVID-19 infection rate increases above 9% over a seven-day average after August 1st, then the school system returns fully to remote learning.\(^\text{13}\)

- **Prioritizing Access to In-Person Instruction:** With limited classroom space, access to in-person instruction should be prioritized for those students whose academic and developmental progress is most dependent on the social environment and consistency of in-person education (as opposed to blended models or fully remote instruction).\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^{12}\) CDC, “Considerations for Schools.”

\(^{13}\) Reema Amin and Alex Zimmerman, “NYC schools can open if local infection rate stays below 5% - but a spike could shut buildings down again, Cuomo says,” Chalkbeat, July 13, 2020, https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2020/7/13/21323308/nyc-schools-reopening-coronavirus-cuomo.

○ Allow all early childhood and elementary school students to attend school in-person and full-time, with the option for parents to choose remote learning instead. If there is sufficient space, allow middle school students to attend school in-person, full-time or in a blended model.

○ For all grades, allow all students with IEPs, students in temporary housing, students in foster care, English language learners, and students in unsafe home environments (e.g., LGBTQ+ students with unsupportive families) to attend school five days a week, with the option to choose remote learning instead. 15

○ High school students who meet the above criteria will be prioritized for in-person instruction, while most will continue to work remotely.

○ The City should contract with community based organizations and youth development programs to provide drop-in space and enrichment programming for high schoolers during remote learning. Maximize in-person, after-school activities, where practicable and safe.

○ Remote learning must include synchronous instruction.

○ Childcare and enrichment programming, similar to the Regional Enrichment Center model, should be available for all students who the DOE cannot accommodate for in-person learning.

● Implementation Logistics: This model would require an aggressive approach to identifying new spaces and staffing resources.

○ Schools should use non-instructional spaces, such as libraries, auditoriums, cluster rooms, gymnasiums, and cafeterias, as classrooms. During warmer weather, outdoor space could be utilized, as well. Larger spaces will enable larger class sizes, as there will be more space for social distancing, thus allowing more students to attend in-person instruction. This would be especially beneficial for ICT classrooms.

○ Where there is insufficient space for all students to attend in-person instruction at their usual school building, under the space ratios specified by health guidelines, satellite spaces should be utilized, akin

to the model under which many D75 schools operate. With many high schools operating at limited capacity, elementary and middle schools can utilize nearby high school spaces. There is some precedent for this, with elementary schools temporarily co-locating in middle and high school spaces following Hurricane Sandy, and with elementary charter schools co-located in district high schools.

- The Department of Education should also explore temporarily leasing or contracting with non-DOE spaces as satellite schools, including Catholic schools which are ceasing operations, community centers, cultural institutions with auditoriums or large meeting spaces, higher education institutions which will be pivoting to remote instruction, libraries, and other entities with underutilized gathering spaces, whose ordinary operations have been significantly disrupted by the pandemic.

- This plan also requires significant increases in in-person teaching staff, given that class sizes will be smaller and that many teachers may request reasonable accommodations to teach remotely. There are, however, many options to recruit new teachers: teachers in the Absent Teacher Reserve pool, F-status teachers, and per diem substitute teachers could all be utilized. NYSED could grant a waiver to enable paraprofessionals with bachelor's degrees to supervise classes. NYC Teaching Fellows should be utilized, and the program could be expanded. Assistant Principals could teach classes. Lastly, all licensed personnel within the DOE’s administrative offices should be prepared to work in classrooms.

There are several benefits to prioritizing in-person school attendance of elementary and middle school students. Many elementary school students live

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closer to their schools than high school students do, ensuring fewer contacts for students attending in-person school, and less time spent on mass transit.17, 18

Younger students are more dependent on the structure and routines that in-person learning offers.19 Additionally, anecdotally, one of the largest barriers to remote learning engagement for high school students was responsibility for assisting younger siblings with remote instruction. This option will allow high school students, who have a greater capacity to work independently, space to fully engage in their classes. Lastly, there is credible scientific evidence that young students are less likely to transmit COVID-19, even if infected.20 Ultimately, this proposal is intended to be a safer way to ensure that the DOE’s resource-limited capacity to provide in-person instruction is allocated in a more equitable manner than the current one-size-fits-all approach, which, in reality, will exacerbate existing inequities.

In a school year that will be like none other, we need to be ambitious about what we can achieve. We need to actively seek and listen to feedback from school staff, from parents, and health experts, and ensure that communication is clear, accessible, and reciprocal. This proposal is intended to begin a conversation around a different approach to serving our city’s 1.1 million students and their families in the fall. It is a living document, and intended to elicit feedback and spark dialogue. 21 School staff, parents, and students have displayed an incredible amount of ingenuity, patience, and grit in trying to make a piecemeal remote learning system

18 School buses should still be available to those students who need it, while following CDC guidance, particularly students in temporary housing and foster care.
21 Please send feedback, and additional suggestions to councildistrict47@gmail.com
work. We owe it to them to display the same level of creativity when we contemplate the system as a whole, rather than continuing to shift the burden of safety and planning to individuals.