



COUNTY OF ERIE
MARK C. POLONCARZ
COUNTY EXECUTIVE

GALE R. BURSTEIN, MD, MPH
COMMISSIONER OF HEALTH

March 15, 2021

WNY Students First

c/o Tarja Parssinen, sent via email: [REDACTED]

Dear Ms. Parssinen:

Thank you for your letter on Friday, March 12. I am responding on behalf of Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz and the Erie County Department of Health.

As a pediatrician and as a parent, I share your concerns about children's health and mental health during this past overwhelming and challenging year. I absolutely agree that decisions about children's health and public health should be rooted in science, not politics.

To your points:

1. Address the growing health crisis among children.

I have been an American Academy of Pediatrics member for over 30 years, and am in close and regular contact with my local pediatric colleagues. Many of my colleagues have noted the serious pediatric COVID-19 cases they have treated and their concerns about long-term complications, especially cardiac complications. They also recognize with growing concern that although safe and effective vaccines are available to the adult population, children are not yet eligible, and will remain at risk of developing and transmitting COVID-19 until such time as vaccines are authorized for pediatric use.

I agree that other public health issues have taken a back seat this past year. From our data, as examples, lead screening, testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections, immunizations, and screening for developmental delays are among the most pressing and prominent. I hope you will add the importance of making sure children go for regular medical exams to your advocacy. The AAP's #CallYourPediatrician campaign contains several key messages that deserve sharing.

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2. Stop misleading the public about the safety of schools.

Our public statements on COVID-19 cases are intended to inform, not mislead. Though the relative COVID-19 risk to students and school staff from in-person learning is low, it is not zero. As examples, schools have large numbers of people together in confined spaces for long periods. Students may have poor hygiene practices, especially at younger ages. Students and staff do not always wear masks properly. Studies of COVID-19 transmission in schools that used consistent implementation of multiple mitigation strategies, including six feet social distancing, have shown success in limiting transmission in schools. Available data indicate that SARS-CoV-2 spreads like most other common respiratory viruses, primarily through respiratory droplet transmission within a short range (e.g., less than six feet). There is no evidence of efficient spread (i.e., routine, rapid spread) to people at a significant distance. Although there are studies that suggest that the six-foot physical distancing guidance could be reduced, six feet remains the standard for other industries, other settings, and within New York State's and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's definitions for close contacts of COVID-19 cases.

3. Provide more transparency.

This request is unclear. Not only are all school-based cases reported by schools through the NY School COVID-19 Report Card, we provide regular updates about the number of school-based COVID-19 cases handled by our department, and recommendations to schools based on reports from our case investigations.

4. Follow the lead of officials in Onondaga County.

I cannot speak to the actions or motivations of another county. And as for a request for additional funding for schools, last summer, Erie County recognized the acute fiscal challenges that schools faced in bringing students back to buildings in a safe manner. As schools prepared to resume in-person learning, Erie County provided \$15.2 million to school districts in August 2020 for personal protective equipment (PPE) and to implement infection control measures, including plastic barriers.

5. Advocate at the State level for a change in the distancing guidelines.

County health departments do not establish state guidance. ECDOH follows state guidance, and supports schools in following state guidance. Our COVID-19 case investigations have identified examples within schools of COVID-19 transmission within a distance of less than 6 feet, despite masks and/or barrier use.

Our department works with schools, school leadership and parents, every day. We can accept criticism of our public health response. However, your group is, unfortunately, misinterpreting and grossly misrepresenting our county health department's role in school safety and policy. New York State, through the New York State Education Department and the Department of Health, set guidance for schools. Schools are tasked with developing local policies and practices that align with that guidance. Though our department works closely with schools in managing COVID-19 cases and providing advice on risk mitigation, we do not have legal authority to set school policy or to give permission as to what NYS guidance can be followed, and what can be ignored.

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Last summer, our department recognized that reducing the risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools must be a key priority for our epidemiology office. As such, we established a dedicated school team that manages school-based COVID-19 cases among students and staff. To our knowledge, no other NY county has such a team. This team has handled thousands of cases, and I know their work has stopped the spread of this disease within schools, prevented cases among students, staff and their families, and kept more students learning in classrooms.

Although Erie County's daily COVID-19 case numbers and positivity rates have stabilized, our metrics still put us in a zone of high transmission, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention metrics included within its school reopening mitigation strategies document. (CDC: Operational Strategy for k-12 Schools through Phased Mitigation, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/operation-strategy.html>).

Our department sees and values parents as partners in our work to protect public health. Your advocacy for children and families is admirable, and I wish you well in your continued advocacy with school districts and New York State.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Gale R. Burstein", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Gale R. Burstein, MD, MPH, FAAP
Commissioner of Health