



Dr. Gale R. Burstein  
Commissioner of Health  
Erie County Department of Health  
95 Franklin Street  
Buffalo, NY 14202

Dr. Burstein,

We are writing to express our disappointment with the lack of transparency being provided by the Erie County Department of Health (ECDOH) regarding the transmission of Covid-19 in area schools and the apparent lack of concern for the health of children in our community.

During your update on February 23, you and Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz highlighted the number of positive Covid tests in schools as a justification for not reopening schools in Erie County.

However, the ECDOH has not provided the more relevant data that allows residents and schools to better understand the risks related to reopening our schools. In fact, the lack of transparency is needlessly creating more fear and confusion, which will prove to be more damaging when the County finally does change its school reopening guidelines.

To improve transparency and clear up the confusion regarding the risks related to in-school transmission, we call on the ECDOH to immediately address the following questions for Erie County residents:

- 1) What is the split in cases between students and staff?
- 2) How many cases can be attributed to transmission in schools?
- 3) In those cases that have been traced to in-school transmission, what is the breakdown between staff-to-staff, student-to-student, and student-to-staff cases?
- 4) How many cases attributed to in-school transmission occurred when masks were used properly?

Prior to the rollout of the vaccine and the publication of several studies that show extremely low rates of transmission in schools when masks are used properly, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that schools “weigh the benefits of a strict adherence to a 6-foot spacing rule between students with the potential downside if remote learning is the only alternative.” How can school boards, teachers, students, and families evaluate the risks of returning to the classroom if our public health experts refuse to provide the public with this important information?

In addition, we ask the ECDOH to provide the data that it is using to evaluate the effects of remote/hybrid instruction on the health of our children. The ECDOH has a responsibility to protect the health of all residents, including the children in the community.



For many students, the loss of in-person instruction is a much greater health risk than Covid-19. Pediatricians, parents, and caregivers have warned about the devastating effect that remote “learning” is having on the social, emotional, and physical health of kids. Sadly, suicide rates are on the rise. The educational losses only add to the severe health consequences of remote instruction.

As a pediatrician, you are uniquely qualified to assess the damage that is being done to our children by preventing schools from reopening fully.

The community deserves to understand how the ECDOH is measuring and evaluating the toll that remote/hybrid instruction is taking on the health of children in the area. How can the ECDOH make recommendations to schools without understanding and disclosing the health consequences of those guidelines?

Policy decisions are about tradeoffs. The public needs to have access to the data that allows schools and individuals to assess whether or not the damage being done to children is justified by any reduction in school transmission rates.

By withholding this data, the ECDOH appears to be choosing fear over education, personal political agendas over transparency, and special interest groups over children.

Our children have suffered enough.

We ask you and County Executive Poloncarz to lead on this issue of critical importance to students and families in Western New York, and we ask the Erie County Legislature to conduct an investigation into this matter.

WNY Students First

cc: Mark C. Poloncarz  
Erie County Superintendents  
Erie County Legislature