



Dr. Howard A. Zucker  
Commissioner of Health  
New York State Department of Health  
Corning Tower, Empire State Plaza  
Albany, NY 12237

Dr. Zucker,

As the Commissioner of Health, your job is to “protect, improve and promote the health, productivity and well-being of all New Yorkers,” including children.

Public health, as it relates to children, is not simply the absence of disease or infirmity, it is the state of physical, mental, intellectual, social, and emotional well-being that affords children the opportunity to reach their fullest developmental potential.

Covid-19 represents just one of many potential health problems. Unfortunately, the severity of the pandemic has taken the attention away from other serious health issues, particularly for younger people. While Covid-19 represents a meaningful health risk for older people, the reality is that for the vast majority of children, the loss of full in-person schooling represents a much greater health issue than Covid-19.

Gone unnoticed is the fact that remote/hybrid “learning” is having a devastating impact on the physical, social, and emotional health of children of all ages. Isolation, depression, and malnutrition have reached crisis levels during the pandemic. The academic toll will take years to overcome for those students that do not drop out of school altogether. Yet, there are few statistics to measure the very real damage being done to our younger generations.

Pediatricians have been trying to sound the alarm on the negative health consequences related to the loss of in-person schooling, but our public health officials seem more concerned about politics than the actual well-being of our children. After all, it is easier to track the tragic effects of Covid-19 than the collateral damage being done to our children.

On this shipwreck, everyone receives a lifeboat except for the kids. Sadly, political science appears to be trumping actual science.

All families would be more than willing to go to remote instruction, as we did last spring, if doing so would help reduce community transmission and save lives. However, the science is now very clear that when students wear masks, the risk of in-school transmission is extremely low. In fact, there have been few documented cases of student transmission in schools when masks have been used. Moving to remote/hybrid “learning”, therefore, is less about reducing community spread than it is politics.

The New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) is unnecessarily and arbitrarily forcing schools into hybrid learning by requiring the use of masks AND 6 feet of distancing between students. **Inexplicably, the NYSDOH reversed its original science-based guidance which appropriately called for 6 feet of social distance OR the use of masks,**



**presumably after secret back-room discussions in Albany.** Neither the Governor nor the NYSDOH has provided New York State residents with a reasonable explanation for the sudden change in guidance that has hurt so many children and families.

As you know, most schools simply do not have the room to ever reopen fully with a 6-foot spacing mandate. While this conservative approach may have made sense last fall, it makes little sense today given what we now know about transmission in schools and given the reduced risk associated with the rollout of the vaccine and the prioritization of teacher vaccinations.

The current guidance from the NYSDOH, created last summer, now contradicts the advice coming from many of our leading scientific experts. In an op-ed in the *Washington Post*<sup>1</sup>, Harvard University professors Joseph G. Allen and Sara Bleich note that:

“Six feet is not a magical cutoff. It has a weak scientific basis, coming from a fundamental misunderstanding going back decades that the tiny droplets we exhale when we breathe and talk will fall to the ground within six feet.

A recent evaluation of 172 studies from 16 countries found a significant reduction in risk with distancing of at least three feet *so long as baseline risk is low enough...*

The risks from covid-19 in schools are manageable. The risks to kids being out of school, however, are escalating rapidly. **For the sake of our children, it’s time for more scientifically justified distancing guidelines in the classroom.”**

Last year, the American Academy of Pediatrics<sup>2</sup>, in noting the harmful effects of remote instruction on children, offered the following guidance for schools:

“There is a conflict between optimal academic and social/emotional learning in schools and strict adherence to current physical distancing guidelines. For example, the CDC recommends that schools “space seating/desks at least 6 feet apart when feasible.”

In many school settings, 6 feet between students is not feasible without drastically limiting the number of students. Some countries have been able to successfully reopen schools after first controlling community-wide spread of SARS-CoV-2 while using 3 feet of distance between students without increases in community spread...desks should be placed at least 3 feet apart and ideally 6 feet apart.

**Schools should weigh the benefits of strict adherence to a 6-foot spacing rule between students with the potential downside if remote learning is the only alternative.”**

---

<sup>1</sup> Joseph G. Allen and Sara Bleich. “Opinion: Why three feet of social distancing should be enough in schools.” *Washington Post*, November 12, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics, “COVID-19 Guidance for Safe Schools.”



In its *Checklist to support schools re-opening and preparation for COVID-19 resurgences or similar public health crises*<sup>3</sup>, the World Health Organization calls for maintaining “a distance of at least 1 metre”, or roughly 3 feet, between students and staff, while warning that “prolonged school closures may result in a reversal of educational gains, limiting children’s educational and vocational opportunities as well as their social and emotional interactions and development.”

The *New York Times*<sup>4</sup> recently surveyed 175 pediatric disease experts and found that “85 percent of those in communities where schools were open full time said their district had made the right call, while just one-third of those in places where schools were still closed said that has been the right choice.” According to Dr. Jeanne Ann Noble, an emergency medical doctor and director of Covid response at the University of California, San Francisco, “school transmission will remain close to zero” with universal masking.

There is absolutely no scientific basis for requiring 6 feet of space between students. Most studies show that distancing of 3 feet between students and 6 feet between adults are sufficient when masks are also used. In fact, the primary benefit comes from the use of masks, not distancing. The data supporting the policy that social distancing of 6 feet between students is better than a shorter distance when masks are worn is non-existent.

Whereas the health benefits of the 6-foot spacing requirement are de minimis, the health consequences of this guideline on our children are not. As parents, caregivers, and pediatricians have repeatedly warned, this arbitrary spacing guidance is having a very harmful impact on our children.

**Unless this guideline is revised to reflect updated data and the real damage that remote/hybrid “learning” is having on our children, our schools will never be allowed to reopen fully and our kids will continue to suffer.** Your distancing rules are a death sentence for many children, and as the Health Commissioner, you cannot continue to ignore the devastating effects of your politically driven, and scientifically baseless, guidance.

**It is time for our public health officials to stop playing politics with the health of our children.** Please follow the science and fulfill your mandate to “protect, improve and promote the health, productivity and well-being” of our children, too. They deserve better.

WNY Students First

cc: Governor Andrew M. Cuomo

---

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization, “Checklist to support schools re-opening and preparation for COVID-19 resurgences or similar public health crises.”

<sup>4</sup> Claire Cain Miller, Margot Sanger-Katz, and Kevin Quealey. “We Asked 175 Pediatric Disease Experts if It was Safe Enough to Open School.” *New York Times*, February 11, 2021.