



STATEMENT
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NC Pediatric Society Statement on Students Returning to Schools

Getting children back to school should not be a political issue. It is a health, social, economic and equity issue. Ideal scenario is that we have no COVID-19. Reality is that we do. Given this reality, we must use the evidence and research we have to make the best decision for our children and our communities when it comes to re-opening schools.

Recently, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) released guidance on re-opening schools (COVID-19 Planning Considerations: Guidance for School Re-Entry). The AAP states a clear **“goal of having students physically present in school.”** Coming from the doctors who care for children, this statement is receiving national attention. The AAP stresses that **“This should happen with careful measures to keep students and staff safe,** and with flexibility to adapt as needed to the community’s prevalence of COVID-19.”

The NC Pediatric Society leadership supports the AAP recommendation because it is based on what we now know about COVID-19 as well as what we know about other health consequences of the pandemic.

We know that children are less likely to get COVID-19 and less likely to spread COVID-19. Fewer than 2% of COVID-19 cases in US are in children. When children do get infected, they generally have mild or no symptoms. New evidence is showing that children rarely pass the infection to their caregivers.

We know that most students learn best in-person and that schools offer many social and health benefits. Kids who are in school are more likely to reach learning goals and complete their education. They also learn social and emotional skills, get healthy meals and exercise, mental health services and other support. As pediatricians, we are concerned about children and teens who are feeling socially isolated, victims of physical or sexual abuse, struggling with behavioral health challenges. In recent months there have been increased rates of anxiety, depression and suicidality among children.

Beyond supporting educational development, schools play a critical role in addressing racial and social inequity. This pandemic is especially hard on families who rely on the childcare schools offer so they can work, the school nutrition program, and health supports offered in schools. As many families of color work essential jobs and live in low-wealth conditions, these services are particularly important supports.

We know education must look different – and we know that isn’t easy. Education leaders are working hard to redesign the way they teach. Schools need to offer education in a variety of formats and in new and different environments. The AAP statement outlines a detailed approach that schools can take to help ensure safety for children, teachers and staff. On-line education must be incorporated for students who cannot attend school. Families need access to appropriate devices and broadband internet. Students, teachers and staff with conditions that place them at high risk of complications from COVID-19 as well as people requiring isolation and quarantine need virtual options.

In addition to implementing measures to promote face coverings/masks, physical distancing, and washing hands and surfaces, schools need to address the many social-emotional aspects for children related to the pandemic. All of these interventions require added resource for schools often operating on very tight budgets, even before COVID-19. To be successful in educating our children while also promoting health among students, teachers, staff, schools must have the needed resources.

The goal of in-person education is the right one. The decision of when and how to re-open must be made with the best information in hand and the best interest of children and communities in mind.

While the AAP guideline recommends in-person education be available, it also recognizes that COVID-19 remains a very real, active threat to health and that decisions need to consider many factors, including the level of circulating virus. School leaders will need to work with public health officials to balance the health benefits of in-person education with the risks of COVID-19 in our communities.

We know a lot about what works: In-person education is best for children, and it happens in the context of a community. Wearing a face covering/mask, keeping distance between people, and frequent hand and surface cleaning are proven measures to reduce COVID-19 transmission. As we practice these measures and teach them to our children, we move closer to safely re-opening the education systems vital for our future generations.

ABOUT THE NORTH CAROLINA PEDIATRIC SOCIETY

Founded in 1931, the North Carolina Pediatric Society (NCPeds) is the state affiliate Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics with more than 2,000 pediatrician and pediatric health professional members. Its mission is to empower pediatricians and its partners to foster the physical, social, and emotional well-being of infants, children, adolescents and young adults.

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