

March 19, 2021

Dear Governor Gavin Newsom and Dr. Mark Ghaly,

The American Academy of Pediatrics, California (AAP-CA) representing over 3,000 pediatrician members strongly urges the California Department of Health (CDH) to update its guidelines on school reopening based on the latest science and data and to do so no later than April 1.

The negative impact on children's health of not having in-person instruction is already being felt across our state. Schools provide our children safety, nutrition, mental health support, social and emotional skill-building. The services provided by schools are even more paramount for children with disabilities and other special needs. Yet, according to school opening data collected by Burbio, California now ranks 50th of the 50 states for the proportion of K-12 students who attend school full time as of March 15, 2021.¹ Urgent action must be taken to reopen schools this year and avoid severe disruption of the academic year ahead.

There is ample data showing that opening schools does not endanger children, educators and school staff or raise a community's risk factors. As physicians caring for children, we operate at the nexus of public health and individual health. The safety of children, educators, and staff is our utmost concern and priority and should be paramount in planning school-reopening. In chorus with our trusted scientists in public health at the CDC,² Harvard Global Health Institute,³ and others, evidence has shown that safe in-person education for TK-12th grade can be accomplished with properly implemented safety protocols even in areas of high community spread.

We make the following recommendations for school reopening based on current science and data:

- Decouple reopening from the rate of community spread. Recent studies from North Carolina⁴ and Wisconsin⁵ showed zero in-school transmissions from students to staff even at a time when the community was experiencing high COVID prevalence. The tier system further exacerbates existing inequities by making it more difficult for schools with fewer resources to open while allowing well-resourced schools to continue in-person learning.
- Lower physical distancing guidelines from a 6 foot requirement to 3 feet. According to a study published in *Clinical Infectious Diseases* on March 10, 2021, "lower physical distancing policies can be adopted in school settings with masking mandates without negatively impacting student or staff safety"⁶ and is consistent with recommendations from the WHO and the American Academy of Pediatrics.⁷ On March 19, the CDC revised its physical distancing recommendations from 6 feet to 3 feet and provided guidance on when to distance farther.⁸

The adverse consequences for children's physical and mental health far outweigh the benefits of keeping schools closed. We urge the state of California to modify school reopening guidelines in accordance with the best scientific evidence. We know it can be done safely and we know the time to reopen our schools is long overdue.

¹ <https://info.burbio.com/school-tracker-update-mar-15/>

² <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2775875>

³ https://globalepidemics.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/pandemic_resilient_schools_briefing_72020.pdf

⁴ <https://www.aappublications.org/news/2021/01/08/covid-north-carolina-schools-study-010821>

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7004e3.htm>

⁶ <https://academic.oup.com/cid/advance-article/doi/10.1093/cid/ciab230/6167856?searchresult=1>

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<https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>

⁸ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/operation-strategy.html>