



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Area lawmakers, education leaders call on state to release school reopening guidelines: Group highlights why work needs to begin now to ensure safe reopenings in September (UPDATE: Watch a replay of today's press conference)

THOMAS F. O'MARA July 8, 2020

| ISSUE: **LOCAL SCHOOLS**



The group highlighted the success of the regional COVID-19 response, praising the work of local officials and the ongoing cooperation of local citizens and communities to follow the safety guidelines recommended to stop the spread of the coronavirus and demonstrate the feasibility of safe reopening. The group also noted that the knowledge and experience gained over the past several months leaves them confident about developing and implementing safe school reopening

plans for September – if, they stressed, the state releases the necessary protocols and gives school districts ample time to thoroughly prepare their facilities and staff.

Horseheads, N.Y., July 8—U.S. Representative Tom Reed (R-NY), Senator Tom O’Mara (R,C,I-Big Flats), Assemblyman Phil Palmesano (R,C,I-Corning), Assemblyman Chris Friend (R,C,I-Big Flats), Assemblywoman Marjorie Byrnes (R,C-Caledonia) and Assemblyman Joseph Giglio (R,C,I-Gowanda) today joined regional education leaders to call on New York State to give area schools the go-ahead to begin implementing plans to reopen in September.

The New York State Board of Regents and the State Education Department announced in late April the formation of a School Reopening Task Force to oversee school reopenings. In June, the task force held a series of virtual meetings with four Regional School Reopening Task Forces representing teachers, parents, administrators, school board members and non-instructional school personnel, among others, to gather input on the protocols that will then guide New York’s 700 local school districts in devising their reopening plans.

School administrators across the area are relying on state officials to follow the plan it outlined and release its guidance as soon as possible.

Despite the significant time, effort and professional input that has gone into the Regional School Reopening Task Forces, over the past week New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has reiterated that he alone will have the final say. On Monday, he said that the state Department of Health (DOH) and his own, previously formed Reimagine Education Advisory Council, are also working to develop “forthcoming” guidance, but gave no definitive timetable.

During a news conference today at the GST BOCES Bush Campus in Horseheads, area leaders stressed that schools need to start planning now to be ready for reopening in September and called on the governor to quickly release the necessary guidelines.

In a joint statement, Reed, O’Mara, Palmesano, Friend, Byrnes and Giglio said, “Our local county leaders, health professionals, educators, teachers and communities have demonstrated enormous dedication, discipline and responsibility throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Our communities’ leaders have demonstrated they can be trusted with a careful and thorough reopening of schools that is focused on safety, first and foremost. No one cares more about the health and well-being of our students, families and school communities. What has been accomplished by administrators, teachers and parents to help students throughout this public health crisis has been remarkable. These efforts must continue to supplement ongoing instruction because in-person schooling is fundamentally important to the long-term health and well-being of our young people and their families. Nothing can replace our children being in school. It’s central to quality education, our ongoing economic recovery and the strength of our social fabric. Governor Cuomo needs to release the guidelines so that school administrators can get to work implementing a safe reopening for September. The governor can’t leave school districts, students, teachers and parents waiting until the final minute for guidance.”

[Watch a replay of today's press conference [HERE](#).]

The group highlighted the success of the regional COVID-19 response, praising the work of local officials and the ongoing cooperation of local citizens and communities to follow the safety guidelines recommended to stop the spread of the coronavirus and demonstrate the feasibility of safe reopening. The group also noted that the knowledge and experience gained over the past several months leaves them confident about developing and implementing safe school reopening plans for September – if, they stressed, the state releases the necessary protocols and gives school districts ample time to thoroughly prepare their facilities and staff.

Bath CSD Superintendent Joe Rumsey said, “As school superintendents in the Southern Tier of New York State, we saw our school communities rally around the abrupt move to remote learning. In a matter of days, teachers, parents, students and school leaders moved their entire educational system to the living rooms and kitchen tables of our families as teachers taught and students learned remotely. We could not have been prouder of the collective work and dedication that was put into this effort. Teachers bent over backwards and students used technology in ways they hadn’t ever envisioned. Parents took the herculean task of being parents, caregivers and teachers. Despite this, we learned quite quickly that this is not a model of instruction for students in Pre-K through 12th grade that works. Between low or no bandwidth, working families, children in daycare or children being cared for by older siblings, and the additional lack of socialization and engagement, learning suffered greatly. We collectively ask that Governor Cuomo provide us the necessary planning parameters to prepare for the rapidly approaching school year.”

Hornell CSD Superintendent Jeremy Palotti said, “We have reached out to our school communities. Our teachers, our parents and most importantly, our kids, want to be back in school every day. We recognize that restrictions will have to be in place and that we will have to be diligent in placing safeguards to limit the spread of this virus, but we are willing to do so to allow our kids back into our classrooms with teachers. Let local schools, with the guidance of their county health officials and school physicians, create plans to teach our students in person. They know our schools, they know our communities and they know what we are capable of accomplishing. Governor Cuomo, please give us the parameters to assist in our planning.”

Canaseraga CSD Superintendent Chad Groff said, “As school leaders, nothing is as important to us as the safety of our children. We are confident that we can bring our students back to school in the fall and give them the education they deserve in person with our teachers and

with their peers. To do this, we must have the planning parameters in place from the Governor's Office as soon as possible. As we need this information to prepare, families also need time to set up childcare and safety nets for potential closing. Safety will be at the forefront of all of our decisions and planning. Common sense, along with practical and timely guidance, will allow us to continue to support the academic and social growth of our children."

Steuben County Manager Jack Wheeler said, "Public Health Director Darlene Smith and I thank our elected officials and school administrators for their urgent call for the release of guidelines for school reopening and local decision making authority. We believe it is critical that our county health departments be able to work with schools in our region to review plans and provide recommendations. No one knows the needs of our students better than school and local officials, and this collaboration will provide for the development of plans that comply with overarching state guidelines, while addressing the specific protective measures needed in our community."

National experts, including Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), have emphasized the importance of returning to in-person school.

Testifying before Congress recently, Fauci said, "I feel very strongly we need to do whatever we can to get the children back to school."

The AAP has put forth a detailed school reopening blueprint that "strongly advocates that all policy considerations for the coming school year should start with a goal of having students physically present in school." The academy adds that "the importance of in-person learning is well-documented, and there is already evidence of the negative impacts on children because of school closures in the spring of 2020."

AAP President Dr. Sally Goza recently said, “We know that children learn more in school than just reading, writing and arithmetic. They get social and emotional skills, healthy meals and exercise, mental health support and other things that you just can’t get with online learning.”