



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' ~ for the week of March 29, 2021 ~ 'It's time to go back to school'

THOMAS F. O'MARA March 29, 2021

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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.

Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature, as well as on legislative actions, local initiatives, state programs and policies, and more. Stop back every Monday for Senator O'Mara's latest column...

This week, **"It's time to go back to school"**

Together with my regional legislative colleagues, state Assembly representatives Marjorie Byrnes, Chris Friend, Joe Giglio and Phil Palmesano, we are sending a message to Governor Andrew Cuomo: It's time.

We believe it is time to allow every local school district throughout the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions we represent -- and, in our view, districts across New York State -- to return to full-time, in-person classroom instruction.

School administrators and staff are ready. Teachers are ready. Most importantly, students and their families are ready.

All that is left standing in the way is for Governor Cuomo and the state Department of Health to give the go-ahead, reissue the guidance and protocols that most accurately reflect current COVID-19 conditions, and, finally, authorize the necessary local flexibility that will allow district administrators and their school communities to accomplish a complete return to the classroom effectively, efficiently, safely, and successfully.

Recently, we have joined school superintendents from throughout the region urging the Cuomo administration to do just that. Superintendents rightly note that while some, mostly smaller districts have been able to fully resume daily, in-person learning, most districts, especially larger ones, cannot do the same for their students and families because New York's current Executive Order requiring a minimum distance of 6 feet between students in classrooms prevents it.

Until New York State revises this mandate and reduces the distancing requirement from 6 feet to 3 feet -- a move now supported by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), many physicians and public health experts, as well as scientific studies and data -- students in too many districts will remain shut out from returning to their classrooms full time.

On March 17th, 23 regional school superintendents representing the Greater Southern Tier BOCES expressed their collective support for the move from 6 to 3 feet distancing in a letter to Governor Cuomo. They wrote, in part, "It is our sincere hope that you and the Department of Health will consider a more equitable approach in adjusting the density requirements that are prohibiting full in-person daily learning from occurring. Our students need more connection, instruction, and interaction. Our school communities need to see that there is light at the end of this pandemic tunnel."

On March 19th, the CDC, acknowledging a growing body of public health data surveying the experience of school systems over the past year of the COVID-19 pandemic, revised its guidelines to permit 3-foot distancing in school classrooms. The new CDC guidelines also include reduced distancing guidelines for performing arts education participants, from 12- to 6-feet apart, a move that we as legislators had also called for in a February 19th letter to Governor Cuomo. Adopting this new distancing guideline would allow for more students to participate in the performing arts.

Consequently, we are calling on Governor Cuomo to immediately move forward to allow the requested change in state regulations. On February 25, during a joint Senate-Assembly public hearing, New York State Health Commissioner Howard Zucker stated that guidance for reopening schools would be forthcoming as early as the week following the hearing. It's now more than one month later and there is still no revised guidance or clarity on one of most important post-COVID actions that New York State must engage.

This ongoing delay and uncertainty is unacceptable. It is time for the Cuomo administration to move this priority to the top of the list. It is time to fully acknowledge just how central and how critical this action is to the educational development and mental health of our students.

In short, if New York State provides the necessary flexibility, area superintendents are confident they are in a position to immediately reopen, fully and safely.

We are proud to highlight the success of the regional COVID-19 response. We praise the work of local officials and the ongoing cooperation of local citizens and communities to follow the safety guidelines recommended for stopping the spread of the coronavirus and demonstrating the feasibility of safe reopening. The knowledge and experience gained over the past year leave all of us confident about implementing full and safe school reopenings – if, we stress again, the state releases the necessary protocols and gives districts ample flexibility to thoroughly prepare their facilities and staff.

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 year-long efforts, we believe, have earned the right to local decision making to now determine 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 revised guidelines so that all school administrators have the ability to implement a safe, full-time reopening of our schools. He should no longer leave administrators, staff, teachers and, especially, students and their parents waiting.

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