

July 20, 2020

Dear Members of the Woodbridge Board of Education,

First of all, we would like to acknowledge the ongoing efforts of the School Reopening Committee and BOE to support the education and well-being of our kids in these unprecedented times as well as the hard work of our dedicated teaching staff to support the kids through distance learning towards the end of the last academic year. While the distance learning platform was far from being optimal, there is plenty to learn from this experience for future implementation, if that were to become necessary. We have given sincere thought to all the faculty letters who have voiced legitimate concerns. We all need to stand together and support our teachers to ensure safe school reopening for all staff and students. We understand the delicate situation of many families who need to send their kids to school and we ourselves are unsure if we will choose to send our child to school in fall. It indeed isn't an easy decision! However, we would like to ask – “Do we want our kids and school staff to be guinea pigs to generate data on transmission rate of COVID-19? Is it acceptable that we put them in harm's way or to lose an innocent life? We do have a moral and social obligation toward each other.

A recent large scale study from South Korea ([cdc.gov/eid/article/26/10/20-1315_article](https://www.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/10/20-1315_article)) shows that children between the ages of 10 and 19 can transmit the virus within a household just as much as adults while children ages 9 or less transmitted the virus at a lower rate. Several studies from Europe and Asia have suggested that young children are less likely to get infected and to spread the virus. However, these studies were at a much smaller scale and called flawed by Dr. Ashish Jha, director of the Harvard Global Health Institute. There are other reports/studies that suggest children are not the transmission vectors. Yet, there are reports across multiple states with rising cases at day care centers (<https://www.texastribune.org/2020/07/01/texas-day-care-coronavirus-cases-rising/>; <https://www.nbcbayarea.com/investigations/nearly-a-thousand-covid-19-cases-reported-in-california-daycares/2326813/>). In short, there is so much unknown with respect to the spread of this virus.

Connecticut is doing fairly well in reducing cases and in reducing hospitalizations and deaths, but the nation is doing poorly and we are an island in that greater sea. Much of America just ran an experiment with declaring early victory on the virus including ditching the use of masks, and the results are evident with the ongoing surge in cases which indicates that we cannot let our guard down. Almost every industry that stayed open or has opened did so through multiple phases. Why should the schools be any different? We are not even in Phase 3 of the state re-opening process and do not know what the numbers may look like after that. Hence, it might be prudent to invest in a robust, interactive, and effective distance learning platform for at least a few months in fall before schools can open safely for staff and children. Currently, Plan 1 outlined by the committee does not commit to any school provided distance learning solution for parents who want to choose remote learning for reasons other than just the medical condition of their child. It vaguely talks about using the state learning hub and only some level of teacher support. We cannot ignore development of a sound distance learning platform, should there be a second wave and schools have to close again. Other school districts (e.g., Cheshire) are thinking along these lines and planning a mix of on-site and remote learning as part of their overall plan. I am positive, given time and resources our teaching staff is more than capable of developing one. This might not be the most ideal solution for all kids and families, but neither is illness and possible loss of life!

Having said that, if schools HAVE to stay open (and they will reopen at some point of time); there are many considerations and safeguards that need to be in place to calm the nerves of the community. We need to prioritize the safety of our kids and staff. Please find below a summary of thoughts:

- We need to ensure children can maintain social distancing (6-feet) while in-class.

- In the last public meeting, Dr. Shari Storeygard offered some interesting thoughts to incorporate outside time (weather permitting) and these could be considered.
- Social distancing will be feasible if there are only ~10 kids in a classroom at a given time. This might be challenging to implement unless the class can be divided in groups. One group would be in class at given time and the other in a different room (w. support staff) w. distance learning platform. Hamden school district is considering this option.
- Repurpose other large, unused spaces in the school as temporary classrooms (e.g., technology classrooms, auditoriums)
- Use of masks or transparent face shields will be of paramount importance. Allow teachers to wear transparent face shields when teaching. Use of face shields allows teachers / children to observe emotions and cues.
 - Make masks / face shields available in case one forgets or loses theirs.
 - Build in time throughout the day where students and staff don't have to wear masks / face shields.
- Frequent hand washing. Install touchless hand soap and hand sanitizer dispensers to minimize contact.
- Use hand sanitizer when washing hands is not possible (e.g., during outside time).
- Avoid use of water fountains or foot pedals could be installed to replace buttons on water fountains.
- Classrooms will need to be more structured. Choose lesson plans that limit student contact.
- Use plexiglass shielding in the classroom, if needed (e.g., around student desks, around teacher desks, between spaces at shared tables).
- Disinfect shared resources / objects between uses.
 - This will need additional cleaning staff or outsourcing to a sanitizing company.
 - Doors could be propped open, so students do not need to touch them.
 - Keep bathroom doors and windows closed and run any exhaust fans at all times. Stagger bathroom use. These door handles will need frequent cleaning through the day.
 - Establish cleaning protocols and schedule for daily regular cleaning and deep cleaning over weekends.
- Minimize / avoid use of locker rooms.
- Teachers should be provided with medical grade PPE.
- Teachers will need support staff (short and long term) to manage all the responsibilities of educating our children, providing emotional support as well as maintaining hygiene.
 - Additional staffing might need to be considered due to reduced class sizes, increased requirements for supervision (e.g., during recess), and a potential of increased number of sick days.
- There are challenges in implementing cohorting, given that kids have to take different bus routes. If transportation is minimized, maybe cohorts can be established. These need to be followed through for extended day program as well, in case parents choose to do so.
- As I understand BRS has a mechanical ventilation system w. the ability to bring in fresh air, which would be beneficial.
 - Minimize air recirculation and bring in additional outside fresh air.
 - Maintain negative pressure in locations that have higher potential of virus transmission such as bathrooms. Operate exhaust fans in bathrooms at all times. Install touchless dispensers for paper towels.
 - Increase the level of the air filter to MERV 13 or higher on recirculated air.

- Appropriately sized portable air filters w. HEPA filters can also be allowed in the classrooms for additional protection.
- Form a COVID-19 response team and plan, in addition to a contact tracing protocol.
 - Develop a plan for what to do when a case is identified in the school.
 - Stay home policy if student or staff falls sick.
 - Prepare for an appropriate room where a sick student can isolate until they are picked up by their parents in case they fall sick while at school.
 - Sick individuals staying home should face no negative consequences or unfair attendance records, and there should be a plan in place to ensure continuity in remote learning or work for sick individuals who cannot come to school in-person.

We understand this is a long list of items and by no means complete. This just goes to show it is not a trivial task to safely reopen schools – needing time, budget and resources. However, we cannot stress enough that no option that cannot provide a basic sense of safety can be considered acceptable. The situation remains hopeful in CT, however, we need to sustain the low percentage of positive cases continuously over at least 3-4 weeks as the state moves from Phase 2 to Phase 3 of its reopening, before considering asking our teachers to be front line providers and risking lives.

This is indeed a very challenging proposition and we conclude this letter while imploring to your inner sense to maximize the efforts for a safe and enriching experience for our children as well as the teaching staff (be it onsite or via distance learning). Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best Regards,

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