

July 26, 2020

To the Citizens and Leaders of Fairfield County,

This letter is in follow-up to the Fairfield Department of Health's recent recommendation against in-person education this fall. As local physicians on the frontline, we are treating both outpatient and hospitalized patients with COVID-19 throughout Fairfield County. Many of us are also parents of children in schools county-wide. As physicians, we strongly endorse a comprehensive approach to the decision of returning to school this fall.

Currently reported COVID-19 metrics are very important, as are the rates of youth suicide, substance abuse, drug overdose, physical and sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy, violent crime, and mental health disorders. The decision of how to best educate our children, while protecting them, should not focus exclusively on one aspect alone as we learn to live with COVID-19 in our community. School leaders and parents should consider the full spectrum of benefits and risks of both in-person and virtual learning as plans are made for the fall.

As practicing physicians, we recommend a comprehensive approach to education in Fairfield County that includes both in-person and virtual options based on the following:

1. Our area hospitals continue to have available capacity to manage a rise in COVID-19 cases. We recognize it to be a dynamic situation. Available capacity is actively evaluated several times daily by physicians and hospital leaders and publicly reported.
2. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a statement on July 23, 2020, *"The Importance of Reopening America's Schools this Fall"*¹ that details the importance of in-person learning for children's educational instruction, social and emotional skill development, safety, and nutrition. It concludes:

"School closure disrupts the delivery of in-person instruction and critical services to children and families, which has negative individual and societal ramifications. The best available evidence from countries that have opened schools indicates that COVID-19 poses low risks to school-aged children, at least in areas with low community transmission, and suggests that children are unlikely to be major drivers of the spread of the virus. Reopening schools creates opportunity to invest in the education, well-being, and future of one of America's greatest assets—our children—while taking every precaution to protect students, teachers, staff and all their families."

3. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), National Education Association (NEA) and AASA, The School Superintendents Association, released a joint statement on July 10, 2020 concerning the safe return of students, teachers, and staff to schools.² They endorsed *"reopening schools in a way that maximizes safety, learning, and the well-being of children, teachers, and staff"* and called on the federal government to help fund those necessary safety measures.

4. The Ohio Department of Health and the Ohio Department of Education released a joint guide “*COVID-19 Health and Prevention Guidance for Ohio K-12 Schools*” that details evidence-based guidelines to maximize the safety of school’s reopening.³

5. The Ohio Department of Health’s “*Ohio Public Health Advisory System*”⁴ provides statewide monitoring that assesses viral activity consistently by county. This tool incorporates multiple key indicators and should be utilized in determining the safety of in-person education. This advisory system minimizes individual emotion and opinion while enhancing objective decision-making.

Challenging decisions inherently bring difficult tradeoffs, and the decision of how to best educate our children is no different. As local physicians, we endorse a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to education that empowers leaders and parents to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks for their children as we learn to live with COVID-19 among us.

Finally, we strongly urge compliance with the best tools available to combat COVID-19: facial coverings, social distancing, and hand washing. We all pay a price in practicing these measures, but hopefully we all consider our children, community, and loved ones worth it.

We recognize and applaud the patience, effort, resilience, and determination our school leaders continue to display throughout these unprecedented times. As physicians, we can only hope this comprehensive approach aids in providing clarity and guidance to our community leaders as they seek to meet the educational needs of our children in this COVID-19 era.

Sincerely,

Sarah Alley, MD - Family Medicine
Todd Armen, MD - Anesthesiology
Suzanne Barnhart, MD - Obstetrics and Gynecology
Kevin Bowman, MD – Emergency Medicine
Jarrod Bruce, MD - Pulmonary/Critical Care
Jeremy Buckley, MD - Cardiology
Martha Buckley, MD, MBA - Internal Medicine/Hospitalist
Matthew Campos, MD - Internal Medicine/Hospitalist
P. Aryeh Cohen, MD - Cardiothoracic Surgery
David Cummin, MD - Family Medicine
Timothy Custer, MD - General Surgery
Theresa Dyar, DO - Family Medicine
Robert Dominguez, MD - Emergency Medicine
Andrew Dagg-Murry, MD – Infectious Disease
Scott Delong, MD - Obstetrics and Gynecology
Rosalie Fermo-Ullom, MD - Anesthesiology
Jon Forquer, DO - Cardiology
Sarah Froman, MD - Obstetrics and Gynecology
Maggie Giancola, DO - Internal Medicine/Hospitalist
Michelle Graham, MD - Family Medicine

Dave Hasl, MD - General Surgery
Brian Hendrickson, DO - Internal Medicine
Michele Hensley, MD - Pediatrics
John Ireton, DO - Internal Medicine
Anokh Kondru, DO - Internal Medicine/Hospitalist
John Lazarus, MD, PhD - Cardiology
Tarun Mehra, MD - Internal Medicine
Caren Miller, DO - Emergency Medicine
Jennifer Miller, MD – Pediatrics
Christopher Nickison, MD - Internal Medicine
Brian Oricoli, MD - Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation
Jeffrey Pabst, MD - Anesthesiology
James Pan, MD - Vascular Surgery
Doug Pope, MD - Internal Medicine/Hospitalist
Neelkant Raya, MD - Internal Medicine
Michael Reinig, DO - Cardiology
Dave Robertson, MD - General Surgery
Jean Robertson, MD - Pediatrics
Laurel Santino, MD - Obstetrics and Gynecology
Margy Sawyer, MD - General Surgery
Laurianne Scott, DO - Women’s Health and Gynecology
John Scott, DO - Emergency Medicine
Amanda Slater, DO - Internal Medicine/Hospitalist
Roopa Srikantiah-Saha, MD - Hematology/Oncology
Angeline Stergiou, MD - Psychiatry
Christian Tencza, MD - Pulmonary/ Critical Care
Kara Tenzca, MD - Pediatrics
Andrew Twehues, MD - Pulmonary/ Critical Care
John Walter, DO - Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation
John Weaver, MD - Anesthesiology
Jason Weingart, MD - Cardiology
Jeff Yenchar, MD - General Surgery

References:

1. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/reopening-schools.html>
2. https://services.aap.org/en/news-room/news-releases/aap/2020/pediatricians-educators-and-superintendents-urge-a-safe-return-to-school-this-fall/?fbclid=IwAR3lhLljPkILdDgJgEaRjuk69whYMEewzdowh9B-ZvyYdV_w6SIOsw-G2n0
3. https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/static/responsible/schools/K-12-Schools-Guidance.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1qTFi0tm2UoxKv3Ozy57ROQSnkXPHGS_DVn8zzKwpX10zzppbj6klCKmY

4. <https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/covid-19/public-health-advisory-system/>