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Making a Decision on Sending My Child Back to School vs Virtual Learning

Back to school for the 2020/21 school year brings with it more uncertainty and decision making than any school year in history due to the COVID-19 pandemic. And there is not a clear-cut answer that will be right for everyone. The Pamlico County School Board has voted to follow Plan B, offering both blended (classroom & remote) and virtual learning options, leaving the decision up to parents as to what is best for their children. The deadline to apply for virtual learning is July 31.

What are the advantages of returning to the classroom?

It has been shown that children learn better in person and there are many emotional and social development skills that the school provides. For many children, schools are the primary source of nutritious meals and other support services such as mental health. Children with disabilities are dependent on the services provided through the school system. The school system also serves as a safety net for children living in unsafe environments.

What is the risk of COVID-19 if my child returns to the classroom?

There is not a definitive answer to this question. Children have a lower incidence of infection than adults. In NC, 11% of cases have been in children ages 0 – 17; 4% of Pamlico County cases have been in this age group. Most children have mild symptoms or are asymptomatic. Fewer children than adults will have severe symptoms requiring hospitalization, but some children with underlying health conditions are at higher risk of developing more severe symptoms which may require hospitalization. In very rare cases, a child may develop Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C), which is a serious condition where various organ systems become inflamed leading to multiple symptoms usually requiring hospitalization. This syndrome usually develops a few weeks after a COVID-19 infection. At this point, it is unclear if children who have been infected will have any long-term health consequences. Lung changes have been seen on x-rays, even in children who were asymptomatic (as it has in adults).

There is some data from other countries where schools have been reopened. In Denmark and Norway, there was very little increase in cases among children or staff. Both of these countries also had very low rates of community spread at the time of reopening. Israel reopened schools in mid-May, along with other businesses, restaurants, etc that had remained closed. There were multiple outbreaks in schools among students and staff, as well as increased community spread.

Summer camps in the US also provide some insight as to what may happen when schools reopen. In spite of limiting the number of campers, putting in place mask wearing & physical distancing and requiring self-quarantine and monitoring before arrival at camp, there have been a number of camps in the country, both day camps and overnight, where outbreaks have occurred leading to camp closures. Data is not available on what percentage of open camps have had these occurrences.

What is the risk my child will infect others if my child gets infected?

There is data to suggest that younger children are less likely to transmit the virus than adults. Children don't seem to be super spreaders, as they can be with the flu, but this is not entirely known since most of the published data is from a time when schools were closed. In reports from other countries, it appears children were infected by adults and not the other way around. A large study from South Korea on contact tracing showed that transmission was low if the age of the index case (the 1st positive result in a household) was 0 – 9 years old; however, the highest transmission to others was from the 10 – 19 year old age group.

The schools in Germany reopened in stages. As the number of students returning increased, and especially with an increase in older students, the number of cases among students and staff started increasing. There were a higher proportion of adults testing positive for COVID-19 if they worked with students ages 16 and older vs those who worked with students less than 16 years old.

What do the experts recommend?

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the NC Pediatric Society both endorse learning in the classroom given the many benefits this provides to children. But, both organizations caution that the decision to re-open schools should be based on the level of virus circulating in the community.

What should I consider in making a decision for my child?

- Consider the current infection rate – Cases have been rising in Pamlico County over the past few weeks, which appears to be due to community spread.
- Consider household or close family contacts – Does anyone in your household, including your child, or others who interact with your child on a regular basis (ie, grandparents) have a medical condition that places them at high risk of a severe infection if they become infected with COVID-19?
- Consider your social situation – Does having your child in school eliminate a significant hardship for your family, such as lack of adequate meals or lack of childcare while parents work? Does your child receive special services at school that are not otherwise available?
- Consider your anxiety level – Will sending your child to school cause you or other family members unmanageable anxiety? Or does keeping your child at home cause anxiety? Everyone's comfort level with the level of infection risk varies; it is important to recognize that in your decision making.
- Consider what measures the school has put in place to decrease viral spread – How will mask requirements be handled? Will there be room for adequate spacing between desks in the classroom? Where and how will meals be served to maintain physical distance? How will arrival and exiting the school be handled? What about the hallways? Will plexiglass screens be placed in places where distancing will be difficult to maintain? What about bathroom disinfecting? What about the ventilation in the school? Will your child be riding the bus? Will you feel comfortable with the mitigation efforts in place?
- Consider your child's personality and feelings – Is your child an independent learner who does well with completing tasks on their own? Or does your child do best in a structured environment such as

the classroom? How will your child handle the new rules at school, such as wearing a mask and keeping distance from others? If your child has not been wearing a mask, it is recommended that you have the child start wearing a mask now to get used to it. Will this create anxiety in your child? How is your child doing socially since school closures in March? What does your child want to do?

- Consider the age of your child – Newer data does suggest that older children may be at higher risk of infection and of transmitting the virus.

There is no absolute correct answer on how to balance children's education vs the risk of infection from COVID-19, especially since there is still so much we do not know about the behavior of this virus and its possible long term impact. The answer will vary from one family to another, from one child to another and from one geographical location to another. It is hoped that whatever you decide, your child will have a successful school year this year.



The COVID-19 Community Task Force (CCTF) is a volunteer organization established to engage the community in responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic and to support and augment the County's efforts. The information shared by the CCTF is not an official communication from Pamlico County, its Health Department or the Pamlico County COVID19 Task Force.