Message from Governor Carney on COVID-19

A few weeks ago, I visited Stubbs Early Education Center in the Christina School District. I saw students who were headed to their first day of in-person school, excited to make friends, learn, and be in school. They were wearing masks, and socially distant.

In one classroom, one teacher was working with a few students, while another was comforting a little girl who missed her parents. Meanwhile in a nearby classroom, another teacher was connected to Zoom. She was reading a story to her class virtually, stopping to ask them questions along the way.

Throughout this pandemic, we have asked educators to throw out the playbook, to move away from years of classroom mainstays and procedures. And to develop an entirely new way of educating and engaging their students.

And they've done it.

They've provided a sense of calm and comfort for students, parents, and each other. They've adapted to changing information and changing protocols.

It has not been easy. And in many cases, it has not been pretty. I know there has been incredible stress, and feelings of frustration and fear. We all should express our appreciation to our educators, school nurses, and school and district leaders.

Here is the good news.

Since September, 576 students and staff in public and private schools have tested positive. There are over 60,000 students participating in some form of in-person learning in Delaware. It's a testament to the hard work of students, educators and staff that the number is so low. And data from our epidemiologists shows that the vast majority of those 576 cases originated outside of the school building.

So students are learning. And they are doing so safely. That's thanks to our educators.

Over the summer, we put together working groups of teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and legislators to come up with a plan to reopen schools safely. Back then, in July and August, we didn't know what we know now. Based on what we knew then, we made our best estimate of what conditions would have to look like in order for us to recommend a school closure. And we designed a data dashboard to reflect that.

I know that educators and parents have been following that dashboard closely, and many believe we should stick to what we understood over the summer and close schools once hospitalizations and percent positive go into the red zone – a threshold we are fast approaching.

I take very seriously the perils of changing course here, as it relates to the public's confidence in our approach.

But I take equally seriously the implications of ignoring the science.

We can't hang on to old facts that don't meet current realities.

We have to adapt and adjust, just like we've asked educators to do.

The data here in Delaware and our lived experience with the many schools that have successfully reopened, combined with what we've seen across the country and in Europe, indicates that the risk of transmission in school when social distancing protocols are followed is not significant. The harm of keeping students out of school, as we all know, is.

Given those facts, there is not really a public health reason to close schools right now. And I believe strongly that students learn better in person.

However, we live in a complicated world and a complicated time, and it's clear to me that there are operational needs that make considering a brief pause a good idea.

Educators, school nurses, and administrators need a chance to figure those challenges out and regroup. And the Division of Public Health can use this time to retool and streamline its school-related procedures.

School personnel are not immune to the effects of rising community spread, and as more school personnel are forced to quarantine, it becomes increasingly difficult for schools to operate.

For these reasons, I'm recommending that schools pause and take an extended winter break to reset:

These are still local decisions. Some districts may choose to stay open, and we will support them in doing so.

But for schools that choose to follow this recommendation, I'm suggesting they make next week the final week of in-person learning this calendar year.

- Starting Monday, December 14, those schools should transition to remote learning for the final week or so until the holiday break.
- Remote learning should continue until Friday, January 8.
- On Monday, January 11, schools should return to their in-person hybrid instruction.
- Sports practices may continue, provided social distancing and masking guidelines are followed, but no competitions will be permitted until January 11 at the earliest.

We are also implementing a **Household Stay-at-Home Advisory from December 14 to January 11**. We're asking Delawareans to avoid gathering indoors with anyone outside their household.

We are implementing a **universal indoor mask mandate** for the same time period.

And we are considering additional restrictions.

Over the break, we will be replacing the data dashboard with data more specific and relevant to the public health conditions affecting schools.

We've learned that schools are a low-risk environment. We need to do more to give school personnel the information and reassurance they need to confidently reenter the classrooms in January.

Next week I plan to meet with local teachers' union leaders, to discuss their experiences with hybrid learning, and how we can support them to get children back in January. Our Department of Education will stand ready to meet with them and their district leadership to discuss any concerns or questions they may have. We will do the same with representatives from charter schools across our state. We also created an email address (Educator.Feedback@doe.k12.de.us) specifically for educators who want to share their experiences with us.

Based on what we hear, the Department will work with the Division of Public Health to recommend any operational changes needed to give educators a greater level of comfort in the classroom.

This virus is scary. And dealing with it every day for nine months has been emotionally fatiguing. Educators didn't sign up to be on the front lines of a global pandemic. And I know this has certainly been a lot to bear for them.

I'm asking you to hold on just a little bit longer. A vaccine is coming, and it's coming soon. Educators will be among the first to receive the vaccine. And God willing, we will bend the curve of this virus once and for all.

Before closing, I have a message for parents. We need your help. Our teachers are keeping your children safe in school. We need you to keep them safe outside of school. That means avoid indoor playdates. Avoid sleepovers. Avoid birthday parties outside your family. Avoid carpooling without masks.

We're entrusting our educators with the health and safety of our children. It is a weighty responsibility. It's a big job. They're working extremely hard in extremely difficult conditions. They need our support and your help. Please be patient. And most important of all, please join me in thanking them.