

5 February 2021

Addressed to:

Dr. Matt Willis, Marin County Department of Public Health
Dr. Lisa Santora, Marin County Department of Public Health
Ms. Mary Jane Burke, Marin County Office of Education
Dr. Tara Taupier, Tamalpais Union High School District
Assemblymember Marc Levine
Senator Mike McGuire
Dave Allen, Editor, Marin Independent Journal

We, the undersigned pediatricians, family medicine physicians, nurse practitioners and child psychiatrists who live in and care for the children of Marin strongly advocate for the safe and swift reopening of in-person education at all levels in Marin. As physicians and parents, we see firsthand the impact that school closure is having on children's health and education, as well as the disparities between public and private schools that are widening in our community. We make this request with the support of the American Academy of Pediatrics California Chapter 1, representing over 2000 pediatricians in Northern California.

The social isolation created by this prolonged school closure at the middle and high school level is having a significant impact on students' mental health and well-being. The CDC has reported that from 2019 to 2020 the proportion of pediatric emergency visits due to mental health issues rose by 24% among children 5 to 11 years old and 31% among children 12 to 17 years old. Here in the Bay Area, the Emergency Department at Benioff Childrens Hospital Oakland reported that among children 10 to 17 years old, the proportion who reported suicidal ideation rose from 6% in March 2020 to 16% in September 2020. [This article](#) recently published in the New York Times chronicled the rise in suicides attributed to social isolation from school closures in Las Vegas. All of us who practice here in Marin have experienced this. During our days of seeing children and parents in the office, there is an astounding increase in the number of emotional and mental health concerns being raised. Our behavioral health colleagues are overwhelmed as well - all of them have full schedules and more acute cases than they have experienced in the past.

In addition to the educational impacts of prolonged distance learning, we see significant and worrisome health effects. With no PE, recess, walking/biking to school or movement around campus, children are less active. We are seeing a rise in obesity rates, increased screen time and high-risk behaviors. One recent study used analytical modeling to suggest that because of the link between educational attainment and life expectancy, school closures may lead to a decrease in life expectancy for US children, with an incredible number of life years lost.

We appreciate that school administration, faculty and staff are concerned for the health of the entire school community. Most of us have been seeing children and parents in person

throughout the pandemic, and we can appreciate this concern as well as the extra measures necessary to maintain the health of our children and ourselves. We must create the safest school environment possible, on behalf of teachers and students alike. We are advocating for the vaccination of teachers and school staff as soon as possible. We are not in favor of reopening schools “no matter what.” We are asking that science, sound policy and a focus on creating the safest possible environment drive the efforts to reopen schools to in-person learning.

As physicians caring for children, we are concerned with both the health of our community and the individuals who live in it. The data shows that the most significant predictor of the number of cases of COVID in schools is the rate in the community. We support those who call for reopening schools first and closing them last as a response to widespread COVID in the community. Other businesses and services are also important, but studies have shown that schools can be safely reopened without increasing spread significantly.

Our experience here in Marin has been similar to the published experience of schools in other states and countries. As of the writing of this letter, close to 40,000 students are attending in-person school, including at several private middle and high schools, with close to 5,000 teachers and staff working in-person. We have accumulated 900,000 student-days of attendance and there have been 151 students and 38 staff who have tested positive for COVID-19. Despite this, there have been only 9 suspected in-school transmissions of COVID-19, and none from student to adult. While we would prefer no transmissions, these numbers show that with the proper mitigation techniques and PPE, teachers and students can attend school safely.

In this sense Marin is not exceptional. This data is similar to what has been seen elsewhere. In a recent study, nearly 100,000 students over a 9 week period in North Carolina during a period of high COVID prevalence showed zero in-school transmissions from students to adults, using appropriate prevention strategies. There is similarly reassuring data from the state of New York where COVID prevalence is no higher among high school students and teachers who returned to campus compared with community matched prevalence rates. Data from Europe and other countries has supported this as well; in countries where appropriate safety measures and mitigation strategies were employed, rates of COVID transmission in schools was low.

We are proud to live and work in Marin, and we are grateful to our public health and education leaders, who have focused on wellbeing, equity, inclusion and belonging for our children. We appreciate the incredibly difficult work that has been done to move towards reopening in-person education for K-6 our children. Marin has the unique opportunity to move toward equity and follow the lead of private middle and high schools that have successfully reopened. Our teens and preteens need our support of their emotional, physical and social well-being. As clinicians, parents and your neighbors, we advocate for the children and our community. We are ready to support teachers and school staff in any way necessary to achieve our common goal of a safe and timely return to in-person learning as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

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