



Board of Education Column

By Dr. Tracie Newman, School Board Member

FPS Smart Restart Plan & Instructional Levels

As a member of the Fargo Public Schools (FPS) Board of Education, pediatrician, and public health professional, I advocate for the children of our community daily. Serving as the School Board liaison to the COVID-19 Instructional Plan Committee has allowed me to convey feelings from the Board and public to the decision-making process for Fargo Public Schools' safe return to the classroom during the time of COVID-19. In October, [I wrote a column](#) to share about students' return to school. This column is to provide an update on how FPS is making decisions about instructional levels for the COVID-19 Smart Restart Plan.

In mid-November, Fargo Public Schools and West Fargo Public Schools superintendents and administration had a meeting with Fargo Cass Public Health representatives, myself, and Dr. Paul Carson. Dr. Carson is a local community physician and nationally renowned expert in infectious disease, as well as a professor of public health at North Dakota State University. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the rise in COVID-19 cases in our county and state, the rise in children being impacted, and the current guidance from various expert groups on schools.

GUIDANCE

Previous guidance had focused on using in-school transmission rates instead of specific community thresholds when making decisions around in-person learning. With accelerating nationwide transmission rates, more and more children, particularly older youth, are testing positive for COVID-19. This increase could accelerate transmission to older adults. These are different transmission patterns than were observed last spring. Data continues to show that students are likely being exposed to the virus outside of school at informal gatherings and non-school related activities. Experts also believe Halloween contributed to a rise in cases. While we have seen increasing infection rates among childcare and elementary-aged youth, their relative contribution to community burden of infection remains small.

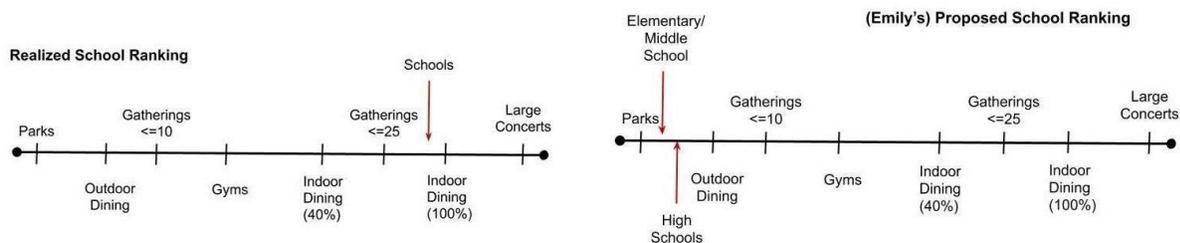
Some expert groups began advising that schools re-examine their plans. The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) Policy Lab, for example, recommended that areas with rapidly accelerating transmission rates revert to all or partial online learning until after Thanksgiving; this was prioritized for middle and high school students. Recommendations noted that decisions around distance learning for younger children should continue to be made at the local level and linked to in-school transmission, not the community at large.



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National experts have continued to stress the risks of children being out of school. Dr. Rubin with the CHOP Policy lab stated, “We need to rally around the likelihood that while in-school transmission is happening, it is far less than in other sectors of society... We would advise that the sequence of mitigation measures in communities feature school closures as a last resort intervention, reserved only for emergency situations.”

Emily Oster of Brown University, who has written extensively around COVID-19 and school closures, is now calling for increased transparency from policy makers about where schools are prioritized in comparison with other establishments in the community (parks, indoor/outdoor dining, gyms, events, etc.). Noting where schools currently lie on this priority spectrum and, in her expert opinion, where they should lie:



Many European countries, including Germany, France, Ireland, England, and others such as Canada, have opted to prioritize in-person education, even as they impose strict measures to combat the second wave of the pandemic. These countries have closed non-essential businesses, restaurants and bars, and implemented curfews, all while keeping schools open.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, immunologist and one of the world’s leading experts on infectious diseases, has recently stated he believes officials should “try and keep the kids in school.” Dr. Fauci has publicly commented that while we must be sensitive to teachers and families of children attending schools, districts “need to keep schools open if you possibly can.”

Of course, prioritizing education does not just mean keeping all schools open, but keeping them as safe as we can. Fargo Public Schools is committed to requiring masks, providing teachers and staff with personal protective equipment (PPE), improving ventilation, distancing as much as possible, and optimizing cleaning and hygiene. Our District has started free, weekly, rapid COVID-



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19 testing and screening for staff. In the continued interest of transparency, Fargo Public Schools also publishes a weekly report sharing [COVID-19 specific information and data](#).

Michael Osterholm, epidemiologist and director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota and COVID-19 advisor to President Elect Joe Biden's transition team, has observed that people initially had a fear there would be "explosive outbreaks of transmission in schools." He stated, "In colleges, there have been. We have to say that, to date, we have not seen those in younger kids, and that is a really important observation." Osterholm believes strongly that decisions to re-open or stay open should remain at the school level, saying every school district is in the best position to know what they can and cannot do.

In consultation with our local experts, Dr. Carson confirmed there may now be new research (early stages) debunking the theory that children are not carriers or spreaders of SARS-CoV-2. It is fair to say that anytime students are in school, they are, at some level, contributing to community spread. However, the efficacy of transitioning to distance learning as a mitigation strategy is questionable and has unproven efficacy when it isn't preceded by or coupled with significant other community strategies such as closures of certain establishments or penalty-enforced mandates. Moreover, K-12 students and staff are being exposed to COVID-19 more outside of the school setting than within schools. According to Brenton Nesemeier, field epidemiologist from the North Dakota Department of Health and a member of the Red River Valley COVID-19 Task Force, "We have seen a steady increase of COVID-19 cases over the past few weeks, but it is impossible to tell if it is due to FPS returning to school. I have seen a comparative number of cases coming from West Fargo Public Schools (WFPS) as FPS. We have seen more cases that are 'household spread' and not on-site while infectious. We still have little (not zero) secondary spread in classroom settings. I can only think of a couple cases where it 'could' have been spread related to the classroom."

Many experts now feel that schools should not lead this effort because we do not know how effective school closures will be without other community-based measures in place first. Also, the risks of non-face-to-face instruction (plus all the harms to students being out of school) can outweigh any potential COVID-19 spread benefits.

Fargo Public Schools Instructional Level

At this November meeting, district administrators and health care professionals also had dialogue around the upcoming holiday breaks and the risk of increasing the spread of COVID-19. Given the current trajectory in our county is towards exponential growth, it was advised that Fargo Public



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Schools finish out the semester in the current instructional models we have in place and wait until January to bring back older students full-time. This means elementary schools will remain in-person four days per week (Level 4), and middle and high school students will remain in a hybrid model (Level 3). This recommendation was approved by the COVID-19 Instructional Plan Committee at its November 16 meeting. The goal now is to bring back secondary students to in-person learning (Level 4) on January 19, which is the start of the second semester and more than two weeks after the extended winter holiday, allowing a complete incubation period for students and staff. We will continue to monitor both in-school transmission and county-wide spread carefully, and we remain hopeful that Governor Doug Burgum's state-wide mandates will help lower spread, ensure hospital capacity, and "help keep schools open to in-person instruction."

Opening our schools is about all of us, our entire Fargo community. If there is one thing this pandemic has taught us, it is a stark reminder of all the services public schools provide. We need continued flexibility, grace, and understanding as we work together to get through these challenging times. It has been said that hard times define one's character. This is a critical moment in history, and, certainly, how we handle our schools and children will be defining moments of our legacy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Resources

Policylab.chop.edu

<https://covidschooldashboard.com/>

<https://slate.com/technology/2020/11/oster-school-closing-reopening-priorities-risk-benefit.html?fbclid=IwAR3BgG2f42vjg8l2iauavHfzK7yxNX1J8rO2GXZeh-x3MExKx2tz4lZm5wY>

Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Resource Center | CIDRAP (umn.edu)

https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/23/world/americas/Canada-virus-schools-open.html?referringSource=articleShare&fbclid=IwAR3Mp2-C9Hfbw4kaLf_XAST5Eq-iHU-L-oSQw4p-JvJ9LZexpMBn3UiZQyY

