



August 12, 2020

Governor Murphy announced today that the state will allow districts that prove they are unable to meet the minimum safety requirements as outlined in “The Road Back: Restart and Recovery Plan for Education” to start the school year virtually.

While we acknowledge Governor Murphy’s attempts to do what is educationally sound, he refuses to acknowledge the concerns of students, parents, teachers, and support staff about the dangers of opening school buildings while community transmission of coronavirus continues unabated. Only a statewide crisis distance learning model to start the 2020/2021 school year will save our students, school staff, and communities from unnecessary risk.

The plan contains vague language that allows too much leeway for districts to make decisions that place students and school staff at risk, resulting in New Jersey once again reaching alarming rates of coronavirus transmission. The use of phrases such as “to the maximum extent practicable” and “if feasible” puts health decisions into the hands of our school superintendents, none of whom are community healthcare experts, and all of whom lack the expertise, specialized training, and the vital funding to make and implement these decisions.

Murphy has previously recommended a phased approach to reopening. “Data determines dates” is his usual refrain at press conferences. New Jersey has languished in Stage 2 for the past four months. because the data on infection rates and coronavirus transmission does not support moving forward. In the state’s plan, Stage 2 lists the “potential” for some in-person learning. However, Murphy is trying to jump ahead to Stage 3 for schooling. New Jersey has not yet achieved the benchmarks needed to move into Stage 3, and we certainly shouldn’t risk our children’s safety as some kind of bellwether. Murphy is not following his own advice.

We have further concerns with how Governor Murphy’s plan requires districts to prove that their school environments are unsafe before allowing them to opt for crisis distance learning. It should be incumbent upon districts to prove that they have somehow ameliorated the danger of indoor gatherings before they are allowed to host students inside their buildings. Up until this point, decisions about safety and reopening have been made centrally, from the Governor’s office. Individual communities are not empowered to make decisions about opening restaurants, bars, or gyms, for example, but now they are allowed to decide when to open their schools. The contradiction between these two policies does not make sense.

Instead of forcing educators and school staff to fight for their lives, we should focus on developing robust crisis distance learning programs that include our support professionals as a part of the students’ educational experience. We call on the Governor to reconsider his decision and move forward with implementing a phased approach for all districts.