



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA
Office of the Governor

Ralph S. Northam
Governor

February 5, 2021

Dear Superintendents and Members of School Boards,

I am writing to discuss next steps in returning to in-person learning during the current 2020-21 academic year—but first, I want to say thank you. I know you are working hard to keep students and staff safe, while delivering instruction in new and unforeseen ways. This has been a unique and difficult academic year, and Virginia is grateful for your service to students, parents, and your communities.

Many Virginia students are approaching a full year without in-person access to their school communities. This is having a real and significant impact on their educational and social development—but after a year of experience, we are now equipped as a society to safely open schools and operate them in ways that protect students, teachers, and staff members. Nearly two-thirds of Virginia's 133 school divisions have demonstrated the ability to do this. But about 40 school divisions currently offer no in-person options, preventing nearly 500,000 students from entering the classroom. This needs to change, even if the decision is difficult.

To support you as you make these decisions, the Virginia Department of Health and Virginia Department of Education issued interim [Guidance for Reopening PreK-12 Schools](#) on January 14. This document consolidates previous guidance and provides new frameworks to facilitate a safe return to in-person learning. Since that time, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has published a study to reflect lessons learned over nearly a year of experience with COVID-19. The research was [published in the Journal of the American Medical Association](#). It reads, in part:

Accumulating data now suggest a path forward to maintain or return primarily or fully to in-person instructional delivery.

Planning for the 2020/2021 school year included much uncertainty... There were no simple decisions for parents, teachers, administrators, or public officials... [But since then,] the preponderance of available evidence from the fall school semester has been reassuring insofar as the type of rapid spread that was frequently observed in congregate living facilities or high-density worksites has not been reported in education settings in schools...

Decisions made today can help ensure safe operation of schools and provide critical services to children and adolescents in the US. Some of these decisions may be difficult. They include

a commitment to implement community-based policies that reduce transmission when SARS-CoV-2 incidence is high (e.g., by restricting indoor dining at restaurants), and school-based policies to postpone school-related activities that can increase risk of in-school transmission (e.g., indoor sports practice or competition). With 2 vaccines now being distributed under Emergency Use Authorizations and more vaccine options anticipated to be available in the coming months, there is much hope on the horizon for a safer environment for schools and school-related athletic activities during the 2021/22 school year.

Committing today to policies that prevent SARS-CoV-2 transmission in communities and in schools will help ensure the future social and academic welfare of all students and their education.

As Governor and as a pediatric neurologist, I support these recommendations that have been endorsed by Dr. Anthony Fauci and by the President of the United States.

These steps are important as many students depend on access to in-person instruction to grow and learn. Our public school communities provide social connections, structures, and supports that are irreplaceable. The academic, mental and physical health, and social emotional benefits to students attending school in person are very clear. We also know that with consistent and effective mitigation measures, transmission of the virus can be successfully managed in school settings. This is why Virginia has taken actions to allocate significant funding for COVID relief in PreK-12 education, require mask-wearing, limit social gatherings, reduce crowds, and prioritize teachers on the vaccination schedule, among many other measures. Now, we must work together to bring students back to school safely and expeditiously.

To prevent irreparable learning loss and psychological damage, I expect every school division in the Commonwealth to make in-person learning options available by March 15, 2021, in accordance with the latest guidance.

This may begin with prioritizing students who need in-person learning the most. This includes students with disabilities, students from preschool through third grade, and English language learners. We know that virtual instruction is less effective for many of these students, and providing in-person learning opportunities will have a profoundly positive impact on their learning and well-being.

But plans for in-person learning cannot and should not extend only to these students, and you must begin planning now for the eventual safe return of all students for in-person learning. It's clear that not all students or staff will be comfortable coming back in person for a while. So as you develop plans to offer in-person instruction to students who wish to return, you should also plan to maintain remote-learning options and consistently employ mitigation strategies recommended by the Virginia Department of Health and the CDC.

As you plan school calendars for this summer and next year, please keep in mind that current waiver flexibility—such as the waiver of the 180 day/990 hour instructional requirement for the 2020-2021 school year—does not extend to the 2021-2022 school year. I also strongly encourage you to

provide additional learning opportunities for any students who choose it, starting this summer. This could include extensive summer classes, remediation, additional instructional time, or even year-round schooling. You have access to federal funds to pay for this, and the Commonwealth stands ready to ensure that you have the resources necessary to address the loss of learning many students have experienced.

In closing, thank you again for your service to Virginia's students and school personnel during this challenging time. Decisions regarding how to return to in-person learning are complex and difficult, and the Commonwealth stands ready to support you in any way we can.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ralph S. Northam". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Ralph S. Northam