



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Pamela Helming

Column: Let's Do What's Best for Students, Schools are Prepared to Safely Reopen

PAMELA HELMING March 18, 2021

A green chalkboard with white chalk text. The text reads: "Our students deserve better. Help our schools reopen."/>

Our students deserve better.
Help our schools reopen.

On February 25, state health commissioner Dr. Howard Zucker said he hoped to have updated guidance for school reopening within a week. He called the guidance a “high priority” and said his department was working on it. Yet here we are, more than three weeks later, and local parents, students and schools are still waiting on the state.

The majority of local school superintendents I’ve spoken with want to return to in-person learning five days a week, and they can do it safely.

To me, this is simple. Kids belong in school and schools are safe. Our priority should be what's best for students.

While the state stalls, there was recently a spark of hope from the CDC, which said it was reviewing a recent study in Massachusetts schools that showed similar Covid infection rates at 3 feet and 6 feet. The CDC director said they are reviewing the data on distancing and revisiting the federal guidance.

Dr. Fauci, too, acknowledged that accumulating data indicates that three feet is safe and said, "I can assure you within a reasonable period of time, quite reasonable, [the CDC] will be giving guidelines according to the data that they have. It won't be very long, I promise you."

Changing the distancing guidance from six feet to three would enable more schools to bring students back full time. Schools also need updated guidance on bus transportation and other areas under restriction to ensure students receive the full educational experience they deserve. This includes relaxing restrictions on music and the performing arts. We did it for high school sports. We can do it for music and the arts. Let these students play!

Most parents who have contacted my office are asking for schools to reopen to in-person learning five days a week. In addition, 77 percent of constituents who responded to my legislative survey are in favor of it. I recognize not all parents are prepared to send their children back to the classroom. That choice should be theirs.

On February 19, Governor Cuomo said, "If the school doesn't have an infection spike, and if the school is safer than the surrounding community, then why isn't the school open five days a week?"

Yes, Governor, that is a good question. The answer is, you and Dr. Zucker need to work with our schools, follow the data and science, and get this done. Issue clear guidance and help get

our students back in school, where they are safe and belong.