

January 7, 2021

Dear City Councilors, School Committee Members, Mayor Fuller, and Commissioner Youngblood:

We, the undersigned, are a group of physicians and scientists who are Newton residents with specialties including infectious diseases, pediatrics, pulmonology, emergency medicine, psychiatry and occupational medicine. Many of us are also NPS parents.

We have two messages to communicate to you: First, we are here to offer our help. Second, we believe in-person learning is critical to the health of Newton's children and can be safely employed with the appropriate mitigation measures.

Our first message to you is that we are a multi-disciplinary group, committed to helping navigate the complexities of school reopening, if granted the opportunity. We each have diverse areas of expertise and bring unique insight into the considerations of safe public education in this pandemic. We would like to help the City interpret emerging data and adapt to the rapidly evolving pandemic landscape.

We recognize the difficulties the City faces in addressing public health and public education needs. Achieving a balance - protecting both the safety of our community and the social, emotional, and academic development of our children, requires a depth of medical and scientific expertise.

Our second message is the importance of in-person schooling, and our belief that it can be done safely. We firmly believe that in-person schooling is necessary for the overall well-being of our children and that in-person learning can be achieved safely during this pandemic with appropriate risk mitigation efforts – safe for students, safe for educators, safe for staff, and safe for the community at-large. We say this based on our collective experiences and based on real-world evidence that has emerged over the past 9 months.

Decisions regarding school re-openings have legitimately focused on the risk of COVID transmission. However, we cannot view that priority in isolation without considering the academic and social-emotional health of our children, accompanied by a meaningful increase in cases of depression and anxiety among children unable to regularly attend school. This is so important as the longer depression persists in a child or adolescent, the more likely that depression will recur more severely, and for longer duration, in the future. Getting kids back with teachers and friends, in person, is critical to their mental health. It is critical to their future livelihoods as studies show correlation between lost years of school and achievement as adults.

We recognize that the process of fully reopening schools will be challenging and complex. As such, we believe it is imperative that Newton begin planning in earnest to achieve a return to normal in-person learning by the Fall with increased opportunities for in-person learning this Spring. Specifically, the City will need to develop and communicate clear, actionable strategies relating to:

1. Data-driven benchmarks to guide re-opening
2. Return to a single-cohort, in-person model
3. COVID testing of teachers, staff and potentially students
4. Educational programs and guidance for vaccine distribution for eligible individuals

Newton is not alone in facing these challenges, yet where Newton was once seen as a leader in education models, it has fallen behind many surrounding districts with regard to addressing the COVID pandemic. We can learn from districts that are ahead of us, synthesizing both what has worked well and what has not, and we can leverage private, state, and federal guidance where it exists.

We anticipate an improving pandemic landscape as we move through 2021 with the deployment of vaccines. Vaccinations of educators and staff will further specifically mitigate the risk of in-person schooling and support re-opening - but education around the efficacy and safety of these vaccines will be paramount at the local level.

Vaccinations aside, there is much that can be done now to safely increase the amount of time our students are in school. Newton's HVAC testing and improvements in school buildings are meaningful contributions, and the recent piloting of viral testing for school staff can develop into an effective screening program.

We ask the City to create a COVID / school reopening taskforce, bringing together scientific and medical experts, educators, parents, and City officials. The explicit purpose of this task force would be to follow the best available scientific and medical evidence to safely maintain and further expand in-person learning. This will help the community navigate re-opening, ensuring consistent, transparent communication to rebuild trust.

We stand ready to help Newton employ science to navigate our way through this pandemic and the process of reopening our schools. The time has come to create a COVID / school reopening taskforce. Please recognize the urgency to act now, as it will take months of hard work to enable a return to data-driven in-person learning by September.

Thank you.

Respectfully,

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