

# MI SAFE SCHOOLS: RATIONALE

## INTRODUCTION

Since March 2020, Michigan's response to COVID-19 has utilized a fact-based approach. Governor Whitmer and her administration have consistently prioritized the health and safety of Michiganders during this unprecedented pandemic. This has not changed. What has changed is what we know about the virus. Over these last ten months, we've learned the most effective strategies to keep each other safe and prevent transmission.

This virus has also brought something we've always known into much sharper focus: schools are essential. Schools are essential to our students, essential to families, and essential to Michigan's economy. Nothing can replace the value of placing our trained, talented educators in a room with students. Michigan's educators have worked tirelessly to continue teaching our children during this pandemic under the most stressful conditions, and we owe them our most sincere gratitude. However, despite these heroic efforts, we know that many students have struggled with remote learning, resulting in significant learning loss. Schools also provide other services that students need to thrive – reliable access to the internet, nutritious meals, and mental health supports. Furthermore, parents need schools open in order to support their families and contribute to our economy.

Schools can be low-risk environments for students and educators when mitigation strategies are implemented with fidelity. We know what these strategies are – and we know that schools, educators, and students can work together to keep their communities safe. The educational, health, and economic consequences of extending school closures could be dire. We must begin to pivot our thinking from *“Should schools be open?”* to *“Schools must be open. How can we do it safely?”*

Therefore, we are encouraging all schools to provide in-person learning opportunities to students and families that need it. Minimally, we aim for all schools begin (or continue) offering an option of face-to-face instruction for all students in Grades PK-12 by March 1, 2021.

## SCHOOLS ARE ESSENTIAL

Given their importance to children, families, and our economy, we must strive to ensure that schools remain open as much as possible, even during a pandemic.

While some students and families have been successful in distance learning, far too many have struggled. Caregivers are often not equipped to help students with the technology or are unable to provide the academic support that students need. Face-to face learning is **especially critical for younger children**.

Schools not only cultivate academic achievement, they provide critical social-emotional skills that are foundational to a child's development and these skills are difficult to practice from home without in-person interaction with their peers. Our talented educators are best positioned to teach students to self-regulate, become aware of the needs of others, to listen, to share, and to be patient. (cont.)

# MI SAFE SCHOOLS: RATIONALE

## SCHOOLS ARE ESSENTIAL CONT.

Without schools, our economy can't function at full capacity. Parents rely on schools to provide safe places for children to learn and thrive so that they may go to work. Many working parents have had no choice but to leave the workforce in order to help facilitate online learning for their children – and this burden has fallen **particularly hard on moms**. Others have found caregivers for their children, but these caregivers may be unable to provide the academic or technological support that students need. School buildings are the best places for children to be while parents are at work – and this is especially true for essential workers that are on the frontlines each and every day to keep us safe.

This pandemic has been traumatizing, especially for children. Their lives were abruptly disrupted in March, and their mental and physical health has suffered. **Anxiety and depression rates are up** and **childhood immunization rates are down**. Schools often provide a child's first opportunity to receive a vision and hearing screening in order to quickly address some of the most basic barriers to learning. School staff are the ones best equipped to detect and address child abuse and neglect and are often our first line of defense to protect the welfare of children.

In the spring, countless school employees and community members stepped up to help deliver nutritious meals to low-income families. They also purchased and deployed laptops, tablets, and internet hotspots so students could learn from home. These efforts are valiant and made a difference, but not sustainable in the long-term. Schools are best equipped with the infrastructure necessary to deliver these essential services.

This pandemic has clearly **widened the equity gaps** that we have worked to narrow. Some groups of students need in-person learning opportunities more than others, and we should collectively work to ensure that these students have the opportunity to come back to school – economically disadvantaged students, students with special education needs, young children, students who are English Language learners, and homeless students need us.

Some families will still want their children to continue learning at a distance, perhaps because they live in a home with someone is high-risk – and this option should remain available. Likewise, some educators are particularly medically vulnerable, and schools should find ways to allow them to continue to teach from a distance.

## SCHOOLS ARE LOWER RISK WHEN THEY IMPLEMENT KEY STRATEGIES

In the early days of the pandemic, we knew very little about COVID-19 and how it spreads. Since then, we've paid close attention to the evolving scientific research and adjusted our orders and guidance. It is becoming increasingly clear, based on research done across the country and across the world, that schools can be lower risk environments for students and staff when they implement strict infection-control measures. With knowledge on how to prevent transmission, schools can minimize risk and offer in-person learning opportunities to students, especially those students in earlier grades. (cont.)

# MI SAFE SCHOOLS: RATIONALE

## SCHOOLS ARE LOWER RISK WHEN THEY IMPLEMENT KEY STRATEGIES CONT.

**Studies of schools** that are open in the U.S. and around the world have demonstrated that younger children are not major sources of transmission – either to their peers or to adults. Furthermore, attending school in-person has not shown to be correlated with diagnosis of COVID-19. According to **a study published by the CDC**, among children in Mississippi, gatherings with persons outside the household and lack of consistent mask use were associated with COVID-19 infection, whereas attending school or child care was not associated with positive test results. In Michigan, we've seen **few, large outbreaks** in PK-12 schools and **very little evidence of outbreaks due to classroom learning**.

Universal mask wearing in schools is an **indispensable mitigation strategy**. Last summer, some people doubted the feasibility of young children wearing a facial covering all day in a classroom. It turns out that they were wrong – students have done a great job complying with the mask mandate. Reducing classroom density, increasing spacing between desks, improving ventilation, washing hands, testing, and screening for symptoms all help reduce risk. Please refer to MDHHS's recently updated guidance on how schools can maximize safety while conducting in-person learning.

## THE STATE OF MICHIGAN IS COMMITTED TO SUPPORTING SCHOOLS OPERATE SAFELY

The State of Michigan is committed to doing everything it can to support students and educators return to in-person instruction. Schools are essential, and educators are essential workers. This is why educators are prioritized to be among those first in line to receive the COVID-19 vaccine alongside other frontline heroes like firefighters and paramedics.

In addition to updating guidance, MDHHS recently announced that it will partner with schools to offer rapid antigen testing to schools for use as an additional mitigation strategy. Schools that opt in to this program will be able to, minimally, test every educator weekly in order to quickly identify and respond to positive cases quickly and prevent outbreaks. The state will provide these testing supplies to schools at no cost. MDHHS piloted a similar program in partnership with the Michigan High School Athletic Association and over 200 high schools, including student athletes and coaches. This pilot was successful and demonstrated that rapid antigen testing are easy to administer and that the tests can be deployed safely and accurately in school settings. While testing isn't sufficient on its own, when combined with other mitigation measures, it will provide an additional layer of safety to schools.

There is no doubt that implementing infection-control measures can be costly to schools. In December, Congress passed, and the president signed a COVID-19 relief package that provides economic aid, **including financial support for schools**. Michigan's PK-12 schools are expected to receive more than \$1 billion. This is more than four times the amount allocated to schools from the original CARES Act. Schools may use these funds to implement infection mitigation strategies like school facility improvements that reduce risk of virus transmission. While significantly more federal help is needed from Washington, D.C., this relief makes achieving a higher standard of safety more achievable.

# MI SAFE SCHOOLS: RATIONALE

## CONCLUSION

Simply put, the benefits achieved by facilitating in-person learning are vast while the risks associated with it can be reduced by implementing proper protocols to curb the transmission of Covid-19. Schools can be safe learning environments and safe workplaces.

Transparency and collaboration among all school stakeholders will be critical to success. As schools continue to review and revise their plans, they must engage teachers, staff, and parents. And then schools should put their plans to work – by opening school buildings for instruction and allowing students and educators to demonstrate that compliance is possible, schools will build experience, confidence, and trust safe educational and workplace settings.

Finally, all Michiganders owe it to our children and our teachers to follow the rules – mask up, limit gatherings, social distance. It's our collective responsibility as a society to do what it takes to reopen schools, especially elementary schools, for the remainder of this school year.