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Washoe County Medical Society Supports Reopening Nevada Schools
Considerations for the Well-being of Our Children and Community
Include Returning To School

Reno -- As local physicians, and members of the Washoe County Medical Society, we feel it is our duty to stand with our community and advocate for the well-being of our children as our schools finalize reopening plans for the upcoming school year. We are in agreement with the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) that our community’s schools need to fully reopen to students this fall. Schools form a fundamental part of the social fabric in our community and can be a tremendous tool in promoting the well-being of our children.

On June 26 the AAP issued a “COVID-19 Planning Considerations: Guidance for School Reentry” statement which begins:

“The purpose of this guidance is to support education, public health, local leadership, and pediatricians collaborating with schools in creating policies for school re-entry that foster the overall health of children, adolescents, staff, and communities and are based on available evidence. Schools are fundamental to child and adolescent development and well-being and provide our children and adolescents with academic instruction, social and emotional skills, safety, reliable nutrition, physical/speech and mental health therapy, and opportunities for physical activity, among other benefits...” [https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/]

As the school year approaches, we urge thoughtful deliberation and careful analysis of the risks and benefits of all aspects of school reopening plans. Excessive focus on only the risks associated with COVID-19 can lead to unintended consequences that might neglect other critical public health matters. Fortunately, available data suggests that

1. School-aged children are less susceptible to COVID-19,
2. When infected tend to have less severe symptoms, and
3. Appear to be less likely to infect others even if they are infected.

As we plan for the upcoming school year, we stand with the AAP and other child-advocacy organizations and think a full-time return to school, with additional COVID-19 mitigation measures (as feasible and reasonable), is in the best interest of our children and community. Exceptions and recourse should be made for those at higher risk, but the overall benefits of a return to school...
outweigh the potential risks based on our understanding of existing evidence. The Clark County School District surveyed its families and found overwhelming support for this from students and families. Washoe County School District recently completed a similar survey with results to be released in the near future.

We recognize the evolving nature of this pandemic and recommend built-in flexibility and contingency plans in the event new information or events arise. We respect the organizations and local governing bodies making decisions with regards to specific measures needed when reopening (e.g. mandatory face coverings, social distancing in the school setting, etc.). The complexity of such issues hinges on the balancing of overall benefit versus harm and are nuanced by issues such as physical school construction, student population demographics, local COVID-19 demographics, etc. The statement from the AAP provides thoughtful analysis of many mitigation strategies.

With the state’s efforts to flatten the curve in the early stages of the pandemic, our schools were shut down which helped mitigate the impact of COVID-19 locally; but there have been unintended consequences that have directly impacted our children. There have been educational setbacks as school districts, families, and students adapted to remote learning.

The physical health of some students has been impacted as some have been without a source of reliable nutrition and are spending more time indoors and with screens. Child protective services referrals are notably down -- 7,076 referrals from March to May 2020 in comparison to 10,535 referrals from March to May 2019 according to the Division of Child & Family Services, DHHS State of Nevada -- as children are in social isolation and educators are unable to notice concerning signs of neglect or abuse. Mental health has suffered as social interactions have been disrupted and children are isolated which will require additional vigilance from our educators and counselors as we resume interacting with school children. Even the social health of our community has suffered as underprivileged children carry a disproportionate burden with remote learning and access to educational outlets. In the Clark County School District, it is estimated that 4,370 students, predominantly of Hispanic/Latino or Black/African American backgrounds, were not reached during the remote learning phase of the last academic school year and a larger percentage of Washoe County School District students likely face similar obstacles.

Our time-honored maxim of “first, do no harm” applies powerfully to the current situation. With that guiding principle, we share these considerations with our local and state leaders as we prepare for the upcoming academic year. Our children and community would be best served by a full return to school this fall. Let us unite in our efforts to do the best we can and remember to balance the overall health and well-being of our children, our staff, our families, and our community. We pledge to remain engaged and available with our expertise to assist in the reopening of our schools.

ABOUT THE WASHOE COUNTY MEDICAL SOCIETY (WCMS): The Washoe County Medical Society provides advocacy for physicians and patients and promotes the art and science of medicine and public health. Serving as a primary source of health-related information, we seek to educate our members and the citizens of northern Nevada. We strive to maintain the highest standard of ethics and medical care throughout our community.