

We Must Work Together to Get Our Students Back in the Classroom

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With the start of the school year less than one month away for most Merced County school districts, the announcement from Governor Newsom on Friday makes a physical reopening of school sites unlikely in that timeline.

While these new guidelines were disappointing they were not a surprise given the increased rates of infection across the State. The Governor's action took away the local control from elected school boards and superintendents across the county to give parents the option of sending their children to school or learning through an online platform. We recognize that not all parents agree on the best and safest option for in-person instruction at a school site and our goal is to give parents options. As in every situation, the health and well-being of our students, families and school communities is our top priority.

Since March, I have worked collaboratively with all 20 school district superintendents and the Merced County Department of Public Health to identify the safest ways for students and staff to return to school for in-person instruction. We developed hybrid models with A/B schedules and student cohorts that would reduce the number of people present on campus to allow for social distancing.

When we made the difficult decision to close school sites in March, schools were not as prepared as they are today for distance learning. The Merced County Office of Education has worked with school districts to ensure that students have a rigorous curriculum that includes daily live lessons, check-ins with teachers and access to rigorous coursework.

Now, more than ever, we must work together to slow the spread of COVID-19 in our county so that we can meet the guidelines to reopen our schools to in-person instruction. We must wear face coverings, maintain social distance, wash our hands regularly and minimize mixing of people we do not live with. As a community, it is essential that we abide by this public health guidance for our positivity rate to decrease to the threshold where we can open school sites.

It is crucial that our school sites open to serve the students of highest need, including children of essential workers. For some families, especially those with young children and where remote work is not an option, attending school is essential.

As a longtime educator, parent with adult children that work in education and grandparent of children who attend public schools, I understand how difficult and complicated the past few months have been.

Know that school leaders are working hard to create safe environments for students and staff, but we need your help to slow the spread of COVID-19. Together, we can ensure our students have the tools to succeed.

It is up to all of us here in Merced County to slow the growth rates of infection, wearing a mask is not just polite, it's what we need to do to get our schools back open. Wear a mask every time you go out, wash your hands and keep your social distance.