

Community Weeklies  
Back to School

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As the incidence of COVID-19 has decreased and vaccination rates have increased, it is important to reassess the risks and benefits of responses to the COVID pandemic. In February, Governor Northam asked all localities to offer an in-person option to get kids back to classrooms by this week. Locally, our school systems had already taken steps to carefully increase in-person options for children to safely return to classrooms, especially for elementary school-aged children. By the end of March, all school systems in the Roanoke City and Alleghany Health Districts will offer expanded in-person school options for children in their districts.

Research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows that in-person school settings have not been significant contributors to the transmission of COVID-19 when standard mitigation strategies such as masks and physical distancing are used. Our local experience has been consistent with this research. I think this is, in large part, due to our school superintendents' ongoing commitment to ensuring a consistent approach to prevention. As a result, school leaders and students alike have made mask-wearing, hand-washing, and physical distancing a routine part of their daily interactions.

Each week I join a conference call with all of the superintendents of the seven school systems in our districts: Roanoke City, Roanoke County, Salem, Botetourt, Alleghany, Craig and Covington. Since the beginning of the school year, we have discussed strategies to decrease the risk of spreading of COVID-19 in schools. They have succeeded in protecting the health of the children and the families that they serve while creating plans to optimize in-person education and while offering robust virtual learning opportunities.

As an example of optimizing in-person education, one of the biggest challenges has been providing enough space to allow adequate physical distancing. Our school leaders have been very creative with ideas such as staggering bus routes so that children can maintain distance when riding to and from school, and staggering lunches, sometimes using the school gym as a place to eat, in order to give everyone room to spread out.

While the arrival of vaccines- and our ability to prioritize vaccinating our local public and private school teachers and staff- has been a positive step to making schools safer, it is important that each of us continue to follow our prevention strategies to protect children and their families, as well as teachers and staff. The importance of education for our society, including our economy, cannot be overemphasized- education is essential. Let's all do our part to help get and keep children in classrooms.