



STEVEN M. NEUHAUS
COUNTY EXECUTIVE

DR. IRINA GELMAN, DPM, MPH, PhD
COMMISSIONER

COUNTY OF ORANGE
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

TO: Orange-Ulster BOCES, Public and Private Schools based in Orange County

FROM: Dr. Gelman, Orange County Commissioner of Health

DATE: November 19, 2020

RE: Schools moving to Remote Learning Given Rising COVID numbers

In consideration of the following alarming communicable disease trends, in the interest of informed, coordinated, proactive and properly organized countywide school response, at this time I strongly recommend a Holiday Pause.

This will confirm our discussion with School Superintendents across Orange County on 11/17/2020 and 11/18/2020. By way of background, we are seeing a substantial increase in cases comparable and possibly exceeding the volume experienced during the first wave of this global pandemic.

As of today, there have been 15,594 confirmed cases as well as 514 deaths to date in Orange County. Of those cases, 46% have been in individuals 18-44 years of age, with the second largest number of confirmed cases in the 45-64 age group (32%). Orange County is currently experiencing a surge in new positive cases. In fact, we continue to see new COVID-19 positive resident cases in Orange County daily, with well over 1,000 newly confirmed cases in the last week alone. Our 10-day rolling average has increased to 115 new cases.

At this point it is not a matter of if schools will suspend in-person instruction, but rather when they will suspend in-person instruction. Please be advised that four new areas in Orange County have been designated as “Yellow Zones” under the NYS Cluster Initiative, as mentioned on our call yesterday: Newburgh, New Windsor, Middletown, and Highland Falls. Schools either have to constantly test in accordance with the latest NYSDOH guidance or convert to remote instruction, as we have previously discussed.

As a result of the exponential increase in cases of COVID-19 throughout the county due to broad community acquired transmission, we have already worked collaboratively with nursing homes, congregate care facilities and hospitals on protective measures including but not limited to suspending visitation, requiring quarantine upon return from leaving the facility and amplifying testing in order to protect our susceptible, vulnerable and medically fragile population in an effort to decrease the local rate of complications, hospitalizations and mortality.

Based on the local statistical data, and current rate of transmission, in order to mitigate further spread of this novel respiratory illness, and allow for proper advanced planning, I urge all school districts, over the upcoming Holiday season (November to January), to consider reverting to a remote only model similar to the collegiate approach, or the phase in to remote with interim in-person instruction (to include all athletic, extra-curricular, and other in-person congregate activities), as per the examples outlined below:

A. The college model - closing for in-person classes through Martin Luther King Jr. Day and resuming for remote learning instruction only.

B. An interim remote/in-person/remote model to get through the current “second wave” (now ongoing) and address the anticipated gatherings of the holiday season. Allow for two to three weeks of remote instruction after major gatherings during the holiday breaks, prior to resuming in-person activities to address the anticipated spread of the disease that is more likely after all of the Holiday social gatherings.

North Rockland CSD, for example has recently announced such a model. See: <https://patch.com/new-york/newcity/coronavirus-north-rockland-schools-announce-holiday-pause>

Likewise, Burke Catholic in Goshen, which is a high school with several hundred students has employed that model.

<https://burkecatholic.com/ourpages/auto/2020/11/12/62325594/BC%20President%20Principal%20Message%20BC%20LIVE%20Remote%20Learning%20Schedule%20November%2010%202020.pdf>

I implore you to consider utilizing a uniform approach for all schools within your respective school districts, as households are comprised of students of varying ages attending different schools within the same district, some including school staff and faculty, hence exposures, isolation and quarantine may impact students, staff and faculty which may severely limit continuity of operations in all schools and varying grade levels.

The current surge in cases in the aftermath of the Halloween parties and social gatherings, is a preliminary indicator of the tidal wave of cases expected after the Thanksgiving and Winter Holiday breaks. It is reasonable to deduce that families, faculty and school administrators would rather take a proactive, well-coordinated approach now to implement a phased in conversion to remote learning throughout the duration of the holiday season that fits the scope, resources, capabilities of your school district rather than continue the sporadic, unanticipated last minute closure and reopening of schools that does not allow school administrators, instructors, staff and families to plan ahead for such developments.

I beseech the school districts to follow the scientific data, best practice recommendations and revert to remote only instruction to decrease the rate of propagation, and allow for advanced planning for the benefit and health of the families, staff, faculty and school administrators.

I am therefore recommending the schools adopt one of the above two approaches that reduces the likelihood of holiday associated (forced) pause, and that is proactive, which assures a continuity of learning.

The OCDOH takes the health and safety of our children very seriously, even more so during the worst public health crisis in a century. While infection rates are increasing daily, we need to proceed with caution and take every step possible in resuming in-person services safely and responsibly.