

# TheChildren'sAgenda

Smart Choices. Bold Voices.

August 9, 2021

Dr. Howard Zucker, Commissioner  
New York Department of Health  
Empire State Plaza Corning Tower  
Albany, NY 12237

Dear Commissioner Zucker,

We are writing to urge you to ***immediately issue clear and consistent guidelines from the New York State Department of Health for safe, in-person reopening of public schools to all students and their families across New York State in the coming few weeks.***

The evidence shows that schools must safely re-open in-person and full-time as soon as possible. The Children's Agenda [advocated for exactly this](#) last year at this time, alongside the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). We are deeply concerned that school closures during the pandemic disproportionately harmed our most vulnerable children. In Rochester – [just like elsewhere around the country](#) – there were 500 fewer Kindergartners enrolled in the Rochester City School District last year, and 1,000 fewer first through twelfth graders. Our children -- particularly the most vulnerable due to poverty, racism, health inequities and trauma – pay the highest price from the lack of in-person schooling. The AAP has taken the position that resultant learning loss, social isolation, missing meals, and inaccessible essential services to address mental and physical health needs, and the needs of English language learners and children with disabilities or developmental delays, far outweighs any of the low-level pandemic risks of reopening schools to in-person instruction.

***Without clear and consistent application of guidelines from the top of our state government for every district in New York State, inconsistencies in local approaches by school leaders will sow added confusion and fear in parents and families,*** further politicizing the pandemic, and putting children's wellbeing in continuing jeopardy. Local school districts like the Rochester City School District have courageously and correctly decided to heed the science, issuing guidelines for 5-day, in-person school reopening with masks. But without public declarations from you and the New York State Department of Health backing exactly those same guidelines for every public school in every district, there is no "floor" to how far the standards may sink in each district. Even school leaders and parents with the best of intentions may needlessly put children in harm's way because these decisions are simply beyond their experience and understanding.

The responsibility and expertise to provide the guidance parents, families and school leaders are looking for is squarely within the New York State Department of Health. Your guidance is needed ***now***. Parents need to know, must know, and deserve to know, that the State DOH is setting those standards for all schools. New York State must do better for our children and families than to punt decision-making to 800 local districts and their leaders.

The Children's Agenda is a 17 year-old local and state advocacy organization for effective policies and evidenced-based solutions for the health, education and success of children. We urge you to put the needs of students and children above politics, and to immediately provide clear and consistent state guidelines for safe, in-person reopening of schools. The Children's Agenda will be happy to publicly back you and the Department of Health, just as soon as you back the families of school-age children of New York.

Sincerely,



Larry Marx  
CEO

cc: Governor Andrew Cuomo  
Lieutenant Governor Kathy Hochul  
Education Commissioner Betty Rosa  
New York State Education Department Board of Regents  
Senators Samra Brouk, Jeremy Cooney, Patrick Gallivan, Robert Ort, Ed Rath  
Assemblymembers Harry Bronson, Marjorie Byrnes, Sarah Clark, Steven Hawley, Pamela Helming, Josh Jensen, Jen Lunsford,  
Demond Meeks  
Monroe County School Boards Association