
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 10, 2022

Contact: Eamonn Scanlon, (585) 256-2620 x.2608

Equity and Family Supports Must be Priorities with Remote Learning as Last Resort

From the beginning of the pandemic, school closures have caused academic, developmental, mental health, and financial disruptions for students and families. When the Rochester City School District announced with only one day's notice that they would temporarily move back to remote instruction on January 6th, it prompted concern for many families. As one RCSD parent stated, "I have no family here and I am a single mother with three kids. Now what do I do? I must work."

Every school district in Monroe County is struggling with widespread staffing shortages, according to the president of the Monroe County Council of School Superintendents. Despite county-wide teacher absences, unavailability of substitutes, and bus driver shortages, every district except for RCSD has managed to continue in-person instruction. Students at RCSD, who were the only ones in the county to experience 18 months of remote-only instruction, are the first to lose access to in-person instruction. This is another reminder of the deep inequities in public education that lead to our most vulnerable students disproportionately suffering during a crisis.

A return to a long period of remote instruction is unacceptable. Vaccines have been widely available to children and adults for months. Although the number of infections is rising, the medical advice continues to be that children and adults who are vaccinated are significantly less likely to get infected, experience severe symptoms, or require hospitalization. Children are at greater risk of infection in the community than in schools where there is enforcement of mask requirements, recommended social distance is kept, and consistent social groups are maintained to the greatest extent possible. RCSD has received \$307 million in federal pandemic relief funds that is intended to keep schools open safely and support educational recovery.

The high levels of community transmission are causing severe staffing shortages that may temporarily close individual buildings. However, effective management should allow those closures to be done on a building-by-building basis. When closures are necessary, students and parents deserve adequate time to prepare beyond a single day's notice. Communication must include transparency about the specific challenges affecting that building, plans for mitigating the situation, clear plans for remotely continuing instruction and maintaining academic progress, and frequent updates on progress toward resuming in-person instruction.

Circumstances and the science continue to evolve, but we know that risks of serious illness from COVID-19 for vaccinated individuals still remains very low, especially for children, and that masking and social-distancing work. In-person instruction remains the best thing for students' academic, mental and physical well-being.

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