

Wash up, mask up, and back up to curb COVID-19, open schools

Everyone wants schools to reopen this fall. Our behavior says otherwise.

By Joel Aune

Right now, school districts across Washington state are working nonstop to solve one of our biggest societal challenges: safely opening K-12 schools amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

After careful consideration, some districts have already announced plans to go fully online for the 2020-21 school year, while others continue to monitor COVID spread and assess options for safely opening school in the fall.

The traditional excitement and good-natured anticipation of school resuming this fall has become a source of local and national antagonism played out in grocery store checkout lines and Facebook groups as we all try to envision what school may look like without a vaccine. Even before school officially concluded in June, administrators, teachers, parents, and school board members were meeting in communities across the state of Washington to develop plans for the start of school next fall within the context of a pandemic that is not yet slowing.

We say we want our students back in school this fall, but are our habits setting schools up for success?

As a former school district superintendent, teacher, parent, and now, as a grandparent, I can honestly say I understand the fear, frustration, and anxiousness of people right now. I also know that teachers, administrators, school staff, and parents all desperately want students in classrooms this fall.

Unfortunately, the collective behaviors and actions in our communities are not mirroring what is needed to achieve that goal. The sad reality is that there are not enough people willing to take the necessary steps to control the spread of the coronavirus — a reality that directly hinders our ability to safely open schools.

Absent a vaccine, washing hands, wearing masks, and physical distancing by all Washingtonians will be essential to once again blunt the curve and control the spread of the virus. The science says these measures, along with thorough cleaning and sanitizing practices, are the most effective measures to create safe conditions for people in group settings. And as we all know, schools are the quintessential example of group settings.

Our schools provide so much more than just academic instruction. Children of all ages need the structure of school and the accountability that comes with it. They also benefit from frequent interaction with their peers, everyday contact with teachers and school staff, and the joy associated with enrichment opportunities like music, athletics, drama, and art. Public schools, in particular, serve as a lifeline for students who rely on nutrition programs for two of their three meals each day. The same can be said for students who need additional counseling, medical, or mental health support.

And let's be honest, schools are vital to our economy. Parents need their children in school so they can return to work. But we cannot send students to school in conditions that are unsafe. Nor can we expect to put administrators, teachers, and staff — especially those at high-risk — back in schools and classrooms as disease caseloads increase all around us.

Schools are trying to find the safest, most reasonable path forward this fall with students in classrooms as much as possible. And yes, other countries have reopened their schools. But those countries also took aggressive steps to tamp down the virus, and the citizenry responded by doing their part. Candidly, we are just not there yet, as a state or as a nation.

Slowing COVID-19 spread and continuing to manage it until a vaccine becomes widely available will be essential to bringing students back into our schools and keeping them there. Every reopening plan has the potential to become a reclosing plan until we have consistently flattened the curve.

We all want schools to open this fall, and each of us has a role to play in a safe start to the school year.

So, please wash up, mask up, and back up — now, and throughout the course of this pandemic — so that we can start school safely this fall.

Now is the time for us all to come together to make this happen.

Joel Aune is the executive director of the Washington Association of School Administrators.