

HEALTH OFFICER UPDATE, December 14, 2020

One of the most frustrating things about this pandemic is the question of when students should be in school. Dr. Karen Salmon closed state public schools in March and the Governor supported this action. It was a time when less was known about this novel coronavirus and there were far fewer cases of COVID-19. I felt the move was a little premature for a statewide mandate, but I understood the reasoning behind the decision and recognized the need for precaution.

When the economy began to suffer due to the pandemic, and there was a strong push to get businesses open again, the return to in-classroom learning became the mantra from Dr. Salmon and the Governor plus many in Talbot County. The Montgomery County Health Officer decided to use the statement in all of the Governor's Executive Orders that local jurisdictions could be more restrictive than the Governor or Secretary of Health's orders and directives, and he directed all schools to be closed to in-classroom learning within the county. The private schools complained and immediately the Governor produced another Executive Order that included the statement that jurisdictions could be more restrictive about everything except schools.

Finally, the Maryland Department of Health and the Governor issued guidance for determining when schools should consider virtual learning and in-classroom learning. At the time the case rates per one hundred thousand people and the testing positivity rates were much lower than what we are seeing with this surge. Although, I have stated repeatedly, that using the positivity test rate is not that great a metric for making these decisions, the case rate is a good metric for comparison of counties and for understanding the spread of the virus in your county over time. This guidance stated that when the case rate becomes fifteen per one hundred thousand, that officials should consider closing in-classroom instruction and going virtual. At the time many health officers felt that fifteen was too high and the number should be lower for closing classrooms. In reality, no one had any experience to really know what the metric should be because there is no real science to guide us on this. We are learning as we go. At least the Governor was trying to lead in a pandemic and that deserves some recognition.

But then we started the current surge of COVID-19 cases, and Maryland's case rate surpassed what was in the earlier school guidance by 300% (15 was guidance and state rate rose to 45 and higher). The local superintendents have been getting pressure to open schools from the Dr. Salmon and Governor Hogan. Some superintendents are getting local pressure to open schools. When superintendents asked if there are plans for Dr. Salmon or the Governor to issue new guidance, the answer was an unequivocal, "No." The response is that the previous metrics provided were not meant to be the absolute figures but just guidance for making decisions. Okay, but if state officials think it is safe to reopen schools with a case rate in the forties, then why not issue new guidance? If superintendents and local Boards of Education take on the responsibility of deciding when to reopen a school and it is not aligned with the state guidance, the teachers' union and many parents are going to question why people without training in epidemiology or health matters are arbitrarily making such decisions. The superintendent of Talbot County, Kelly Griffith keeps in close contact with the health department because she said from the beginning, "I am not a health expert, so I depend upon my health officer to guide me in these decisions."

Health Officers don't always agree on when to open schools, and they also have asked Maryland Department of Health if they plan to issue new guidance. Over two weeks ago, new guidance was promised, but it would have to be approved by the Governor. We have not received any changes at this time.

Dr. Salmon and Governor Hogan could issue new guidance stating that schools are to be reopened with or without new guidance, but that will not likely happen. And yet the local superintendents and health officers are being thrown under the bus for following the Governor's earlier guidance relative to schools closure.

Do we know if the case rate should be fifteen or fifty or one hundred and fifty before closing schools? Not really. We know more now than in March: 1) children are showing that they do not transmit the virus as frequently as adults when infected; 2) children have far less severe infections and far fewer deaths with COVID-19; 3) transmission of the virus within schools was less than expected. However, outbreaks within schools have occurred requiring closures. But even with that knowledge and a sincere desire to get children back in the classroom, there is no science, studies or experience that produces a metric indicating when children should go back to classrooms. But officials are hesitant to admit that there is no study or research to help make this decision. If they admit this is true, one faction of the public will revolt claiming that the lives of children are being threatened without any proof this is a safe decision. If they don't make the decision to get children back in the classrooms, another group will accuse them of hindering the economy and preventing parents getting back to work without any evidence that opening schools is more dangerous than not opening them.

I understand the dilemma, but that does not make it right to refuse to make a decision on an issue and then criticize local officials for not following the verbal advice that state officials refuse to put in writing. I consider myself a risk taker, and I don't demand that a state official make a decision before I take action. But at the same time, if that state official has a written order or directive on the issue, it is far more difficult to take action opposing that guidance than if it were never given. However, if I also am not convinced that the action is safe for students, then I am not going to take that action.

It is easier for me to say this than other health officers because I am retiring in a few days. But this pandemic and this issue has pushed me to revise a song title to advise, "Mothers don't let your babies grow up to be health officers or superintendents of schools."