

Cape Schools Open Minds and Open Doors

Community • Academics • Passion • Ethics

Marcia Weeks
Business Manger
mweeks@capeelizabethschools.org

Cathy Stankard
Director of teaching & Learning
cstankard@capeelizabethschools.org

CAPE ELIZABETH SCHOOLS
320 Ocean House Road
P.O. Box 6267
Cape Elizabeth, Maine 04107
Phone: (207) 799-2217 Fax: (207) 799-2914

Del Peavey
Director of Special Services
dpeavey@capeelizabethschools.org

Donna Wolfrom
Superintendent of Schools
dwolfrom@capeelizabethschools.org

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The decision to reopen schools across the country has been a challenging and difficult one. As we look at our own state, there is some data to guide both our decision and our (relative) comfort with returning to school in some capacity this fall. First, the state has noted that all counties are either yellow or green which supports reopening. Second, there is other epidemiological data (through Harvard's Global Health Institute) that notes Maine as a state and Cumberland county in particular are low or yellow (1.3 new cases per 100,000). This provides a good foundation with which to look at the relative safety of reopening.

Our next questions regarding reopening pertain to the operationalization of a robust plan by individual school districts around a number of factors but most important are the following, in order of priority in my mind.

- Face masks and hand hygiene - noted to be critical to reducing infection spread
- Physical distancing - noted to be important in reducing infection spread in an indoor setting
- Appropriate screening and education on when students and staff can come to school and when they should stay home
- Cleaning and disinfection of surfaces routinely
- Ventilation - the general review of data on ventilation is limited. The CDC notes, "Ensure ventilation systems operate properly and increase circulation of outdoor air as much as possible, for example by opening windows and doors. Do not open windows and doors if doing so poses a safety or health risk (e.g., risk of falling, triggering asthma symptoms) to children using the facility." Other data from the CDC indicates acceptable air exchanges per hour at 6-12/hour. I do support the school district efforts to look at the ventilation system of the buildings as this is not my area of expertise, however if there are concerns in this area alone, I do think some of this can be mitigated by the other infection control measures discussed.

In my review of many articles discussing returning to school both in the United States and internationally, the primary areas of focus that ensure the safest return are universal masking, hand hygiene, physical distancing and screening out symptomatic students and staff (in that order). In my discussion with my fellow school physicians and medical providers in the community, our general consensus is that schools can be reopened safely in our communities. A model of hybrid learning this fall that allows students to return to school in some capacity in the setting of low community transmission seems to be a reasonable approach at this time.

I am happy to share my references or discuss further if there are any specific questions.

Smita Sonti, MD

Practice Medical Director, Martin's Point Gorham and Scarborough Practices

School Physician for the Cape Elizabeth School District