

We are incredibly concerned about the Governor's comments this morning suggesting schools in South Carolina should re-open with five-day-a-week, in-person instruction. His comments reflect a disregard for the recommendations of DHEC and the CDC that safeguard the health and safety of students, as well as the adults who serve them and are more susceptible to complications from this disease. They not only show a lack of respect for the precautions and protocols communicated by public health professionals, but are also a rejection of the AccelerateED Task Force recommendations. They further reflect a refusal to acknowledge that according to many objective sources, including Johns Hopkins University, our state is being ravaged by this virus, and ranks third in the percentage of positive tests per million residents, ahead of all but two states (Arizona and Florida) and every other nation.

In his own remarks, the Governor called on schools to follow the health and safety protocols recommended by public health officials, without acknowledging that it is impossible for schools to practice social distancing in our facilities, or on our buses, when all students are in attendance. Additionally, if we are required to adhere to 50% capacity on state buses, there is no opportunity to operate schools on a regular schedule. In GCS, it will take approximately six hours to transport students to school and six hours to transport them home if all buses are at 50% capacity, and all students are in attendance each day.

"It seems our focus should be on reducing the spread of the virus to allow for a safe return to full-time, in-person instruction by implementing state-wide measures that could help take South Carolina off the COVID hot-spot list," said GCS Superintendent W. Burke Royster. "As a state, we are deeply divided between those who believe in a 'return-to-school at all costs' platform and those who recognize that fully re-opening schools could endanger our students, employees, and communities, and exacerbate the spread of the virus. Lost in all of this is the voice of moderation that looks to objectively combine a knowledge of educational operations and environments with factual information on the spread of disease, and the capacity of the healthcare systems."

"This type of thoughtful, moderated approach is reflected in State Superintendent Molly Spearman's decision to rely on the consideration, advice, and recommendations made by the AccelerateED Task Force and the advice of medical and public-health professionals, after a considerable amount of time and resources were spent studying the re-opening of schools," said Royster. "Her approach mirrors the philosophy of the GCS plan to safely reopen schools this fall."

The Governor called on Spearman to approve return-to-school plans, due from districts this Friday, only if they provide parents with an option between virtual school for some and full-time, in-person school for all other students. By contrast, Superintendent Spearman stated that our goal must be to return to five-day-a-week in-person instruction as soon as it is safe to do so, without turning a "blind eye to the health and safety of students and staff when the spread of the virus of our communities is among the highest in the world." She went on to say that "school leaders, in consultation with public health experts, are best positioned to determine how in-person operations should be carried out to fit the needs of their local community."

"We support Superintendent Spearman's statement," confirmed Royster, "And we encourage her to approve any return-to-school plans that feature adherence to public health recommendations in combination with a hybrid model focused on progressing toward a safe and timely return to full-time, in-person instruction as recommended, by AccelerateED."

Important Points

- Individuals cannot socially distance in schools if all students attend on the same day.
- Students cannot socially distance on buses, even when at half capacity.
- Though children generally suffer fewer serious complications from this disease, there are still risks to pediatric patients.
- School-age children can spread COVID-19, even if they are asymptomatic.
- Though the Governor said we have an “abundance” of teachers in this state, in reality there is a critical shortage.
- Approximately 30% of the GCS workforce is 50 or above.
- Even in normal years, we do not have an adequate number of substitute teachers during certain times of the year, and we do not have a substitute pool for other positions. A high rate of employee illness, combined with subs’ possible unwillingness to endanger themselves, causes us to have grave concerns about our ability to supervise and teach children. This results in concerns about both academic achievement and safety.
- The Governor shut down schools across the state when there were 28 cases and no deaths in the State. As of July 12, South Carolina had 56,485 cases and 950 total deaths.

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