

Cuomo: 'Just because a school district says we're open does not mean students are going to go'

Parents said to be 'iffy' on sending children back to school in September

The 1989 film "Field of Dreams" suggested if you build it, they will come. The thought was, if Kevin Costner's Iowa corn farmer Ray Kinsella built a baseball field, people would travel to see it in person.

In New York – in 2020 – the question is, "If a school reopens, will students attend?"

Speaking to the press on Sunday about in-class instruction, Gov. Andrew Cuomo said, "It's about the parents being comfortable."

"Just because a school district says we're open does not mean students are going to go – I can tell you that right now," he said. "I'm talking to parents all across the state. They're very iffy on this proposition. And it is going to depend on that school district's plan. And there's going to have to be some dialogue, because the plans are going to generate questions by the parents. And that dialogue is important because, if the parents don't feel comfortable, they're not going to send the children."

"We'll accomplish nothing if we open the school, but a significant number of parents decide to keep their children home."

"When it comes to your child and your child's health, parents are not going to take this lightly."

Just three weeks ago, Cuomo announced new, data-driven guidance for reopening schools in New York. Schools in a phase four region can reopen if the daily coronavirus infection rate remains below 5% or lower using a 14-day average.

Schools will close – or go back to remote learning – if the regional infection rate rises above 9%, using a seven-day rolling average, after Aug. 1.

Cuomo and his team of health professionals will make a formula determination this week.

New York state, the Reimagine Education Advisory Council and the Department of Health released finalized guidance and guiding principles for reopening schools, which are available here. The DOH and governor's Reimagine Council worked closely with the Department of Education on developing reopening guidance.

Plans to reopen schools were due July 31.

On Saturday, Cuomo said, "... the school districts were supposed to put in their plans (Friday) on alternatives or how they would reopen. We're going to watch the overall infection (rate) before we make a decision."

He explained, "I am talking to parents all across the state. I'm getting deluged with phone calls from parents who are concerned, and they should be concerned. You hear about the Georgia camp, you get concerned. You hear about the Kawasaki-like syndrome, you get concerned. You hear scientists and health officials who say they don't know the long-term consequences for a child who has antibodies, you get concerned."

"So, it's not flicking a switch; it's like all of these decisions, it's more complicated than we often think. You can say, 'OK, school reopens.' If the parents are not comfortable, the children will not be sent."

"You have some school districts in parts of this state that are seeing record numbers of enrollees. Some of the school districts, on the east side of Long Island, are seeing an exponential number of enrollees. Parents are taking this decision very seriously, and the reason we need the school districts to put in their plans is because the parents need to review the plan, understand the plan, and they have to have confidence in the plan. If they don't have confidence in the plan, I don't care what the school district says. They are not sending their kids back."

"Now, there will be some parents who don't have a choice but to send their child back because they don't have alternative child care, etc., but there are going to be many parents who, if they think their child might be subjected to failure, they are just not going to do it."

Cuomo said part of the issue at hand is "How are you going to test the students? How many are you going to test per day? How long will it take to turn around the tests? Where are you going to get that testing capacity? That has to all be in addition to what they are doing today. If a locality today is doing 20,000 tests, OK, how many

Reopening schools: NYSUT, UFT demand clear, statewide policy for building shutdown, tracing, quarantine protocols in event of positive COVID-19 cases

Call for 14 days of remote learning where positive case arises

Editorial by New York State United Teachers & United Federation of Teachers

As the state prepares to make decisions regarding reopening school buildings this week, New York State United Teachers and the United Federation of Teachers on Wednesday demanded that state health officials issue clear protocols for how and when school districts must close their buildings, and how health officials will perform contact tracing and initiate quarantines in the event of a positive COVID-19 case in a school this fall.

The unions believe that, if districts are to move forward with reopening their school buildings, they must err on the side of caution at all times. Specifically, in the event of a positive COVID-19 case, the unions are calling for the immediate closure of that school building and a return to remote learning for 14 days before revisiting whether it is safe for the building to reopen. In addition, the unions are demanding clear, statewide directives for how immediate contact tracing is to be conducted and for how mandatory and precautionary quarantining for those who may have been exposed in schools is to be implemented by local health officials.

What's more, politics must be removed from the equation, as elected officials in some areas seek to take a cavalier approach to how their local schools should reopen by criticizing the need for extreme caution, rather than letting science drive the discussion.

"This is no time to take risks," NYSUT President Andy Pallotta said. "If the state allows school buildings to reopen, districts must be prepared to close them in the event of a positive case. But efforts can't stop there. Clear state guidance is needed to ensure that confusion doesn't obstruct serious efforts to stop the spread of

this virus in our schools and in our communities."

"There is no room for error," UFT President Michael Mulgrew said. "New York City's reopening 'plan' lacks specifics on what happens if there's a positive case. The state must step in for the sake of New York City students, educators and families, and those across the state."

A recent COVID-19 outbreak during summer school programming in the Greenburgh-North Castle Union Free School District in Westchester County highlighted the need for uniform direction for local school and health officials on closure, contact tracing and quarantine procedures. After much initial confusion over closing and quarantining protocols, it's plain that the local decisions made were inadequate, and clear state guidelines are warranted.

With COVID-19 cases also breaking out at schools in Indiana and Georgia, the unions said there can be no questions in New York about whether clear uniform procedures for reclosing school buildings need to be in place.

"It doesn't matter if it's in Westchester County, Indiana, Georgia or anywhere else across this state or country, the threat this virus poses remains obvious," Pallotta said. "If the reopening of school buildings moves forward, then the entire school community needs clear direction for how to handle a positive case. Nobody can be left in the dark."

New York State United Teachers is a statewide union with more than 600,000 members in education, human services and health care. NYSUT is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and the AFL-CIO.

are you going to do on the first day of school? 'Oh, we're going to do 10,000 in the schools.'

"Oh, so you will have an additional 10,000 tests in capacity?"

"Yes."

"How? And if you have an additional 10,000 capacity, why aren't you using it now? What will the turn-arounds be on those tests? We know the turnaround times are going up with these national labs."

"Those are the vital questions and those are the questions the parents are going to ask. These are very informed parents. I made it my business to inform the people of this state with exhaustive briefings every day. They know the questions. They're going to ask the questions; and if we don't have answers for them, then they're going to conclude that we haven't thought through the plan and they're not going to send a child."

Cuomo also wants to see school districts do a better job with remote learning.

He said, "My two cents on

the plans, the concepts are not enough. I understand the concept of remote learning. We have a lot of experience with the concept of the remote learning and the experience that we went through. Remote learning, if not done well, can be a vehicle of division. Remote learning tends to work better in the wealthier school districts and tends to work less well in the poorer school districts. It tends to work better in wealthier homes and less well in poorer homes. The measures to correct that are vital to any reopening plan, and it is not just understanding the question – it is having a complete answer. I have had a number of conversations with school districts. 'Yes, we understand remote learning. Yes, we understand the challenges.'

"Yes, but how are you going to meet them specifically? Where is the personnel? Where is the equipment? How are you going to do this?"

The governor, on Sunday, noted, "We have to do a better job on re-

ote learning. It can't just be, 'Yes, we understand we have to do remote learning.' There were many inequities in remote learning. I'm not faulting anyone, because local school districts had to make a rapid transition, but we've now had several months; we have to do a better job."

He acknowledged teachers' unions, like parents, also will have concerns related to school district reopening plans.

"Teachers are concerned. Some of them are older; they're in the more vulnerable populations. They don't have the same level of comfort that some people have with young people (supposedly) not getting COVID," Cuomo said.

"Everybody has to be comfortable with this plan," he noted.

Bottom line: The governor said, "If the infection rate is increasing, I'm going to hit the stop button. Or, if something happens (that's) dramatic, we'll hit the stop button. We're not going to let children be in danger."

Niagara Wheatfield reopening plan (cont.)

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be able to send letters home, 'Hey, our class has this (illness) going through it; head lice, or strep throat.' There's no notification home that says there was someone who was possibly COVID positive in a classroom. ... A parent could easily take that child to get tested, not let us know, give the child enough Tylenol so it breaks the

fever and send back to school the next day, and three or four days later find out, 'Oh yeah, (the student) was COVID positive. I mean, that is something that the state needs to address.'

Ljiljanich said he agreed "100%" with Sabo's concerns and said the first line of defense will have to come from parents.

"More than ever, we need to

make sure that (parents) are checking their kids that they're not sending kids (if they're sick.) ... With COVID, they really need to make sure," Ljiljanich said.

Assistant Superintendent Tom Stack also said that, in spite of the restrictions placed on schools, he has faith the Niagara County Department of Health – which is handling cases – can help keep the

district aware of any issues.

"We have some examples of that already occurring already this summer, just with staff. The contact tracing is actually pretty impressive. There is an email (from the DOH about a positive case.)

... From there, they're going to be asking us a myriad of questions. Now where the student was, who the student was in contact with, what a schedule looked like for that particular student, what buses the student (rode)," he said.

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