WE'RE OPEN OR WE'RE NOT OPEN. NOW WHAT?

USE THE SCIENCE, AND BASIC PRINCIPLES

BY DOROTHY WIGMORE

What does "safe" or "healthy" mean for students and staff and their communities during a pandemic?

As of press time, it was not yet clear whether or how New Jersey school buildings would open in September and if they did open what form the opening would take. Districts were to prepare a "Restart and Recovery" plan with community stakeholders, using the state's *The Road Back* document with mandatory requirements and guidelines about "anticipated minimum standards."

By the time this article arrives in mailboxes, readers will know what is happening, or not happening, in their school districts and in districts across the state. Whatever the status of schools in September, the only certainty is that uncertainty will remain.

In addition to this article, and others in this edition of the Review, visit *njea.org/covid* for the latest guidance.

WHAT DO WE (NOT) KNOW?

We're still learning about the SARS-CoV2 virus behind COVID-19. From pre-pandemic studies, earlier epidemics, and new research, we know:

- The contagious virus gets into the air when people with it sneeze, cough, shout, sing, and/or talk. Sometimes it's just infected people breathing.
- Long-established science shows small respiratory particles ("aerosols") matter. Floating easily in the air, they can get into the lungs.
- At least 40% of people with the virus may share it without having symptoms.
- The longer and closer we are to an infected person (in poorly ventilated spaces), the more likely we will inhale it.
- Effective widespread testing, contact tracing and isolation/quarantine is essential to reduce cases.
- A recent study found students aged 10 to 19 spread the virus like adults do.
- It's still unclear if children and teens are affected as often as adults, how they react, and how long it will take to find an effective vaccine for all.

WHAT ABOUT CLEANING AND DISINFECTING?

Inexpensive soap and water disable the virus, stopping its spread. Studies show absenteeism and disease go down when children wash their hands regularly with soap and water. Children should not use commercial cleaning products or disinfecting wipes, given the hazards.

Disinfect **only** after cleaning and when it's necessary, using the least toxic products. The district **must** supply them, not individuals. (See *njea.org/cleaning-to-fight-covid-19-in-schools-and-at-home*.)

Procurement policies should require contractors use the least-toxic products and procedures and purchase them for staff. They should ban fogging with disinfectant; it's hazardous, costly and ineffective.

PRINCIPLES AND OTHER ESSENTIALS FOR PLANS

Pandemic experiences vary by community. A specialist who has examined many reopening recommendations says districts could consider this when there are:

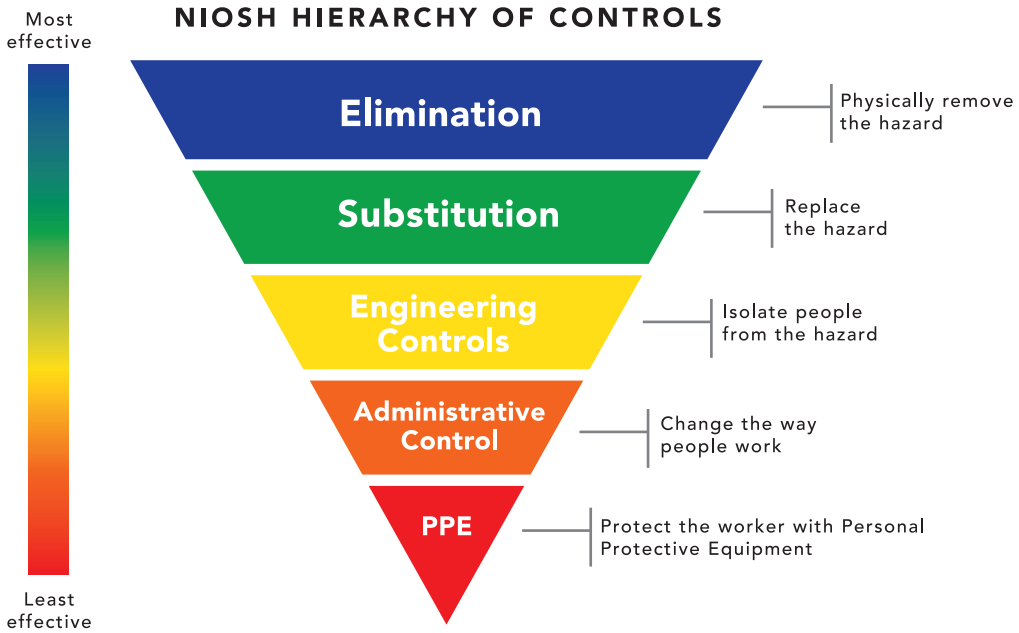
- Five new cases (or fewer) daily *per 100,000* population, locally.
- Decreasing cases for the last 14 days in the area
- Local hospitals have at least 25% extra capacity to handle more cases.

"Don't hold ourselves accountable to be normal," Dr. Michael Osterholm, the University of Minnesota's Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP) director, said in a July podcast. "Hold ourselves accountable to get through it with as much grace, as much wisdom and as much… fortitude as possible."

District plans should be guided by principles and approaches including:

- Accept that 2020-21 is a "COVID year." Remember, schools in Louisiana redid the year after Hurricane Katrina.
- Decisions must be driven by data **and** the precautionary principle when the science is not clear.
- Take time. Allow for changes with new information.
- We must live with the virus for now. If schools reopen, students and staff will be infected. Policies and procedures to deal with infections must exist **before** they return.
- Be flexible and creative, fitting solutions to multiple needs (e.g., school buses can be internet "hot spots," driven to areas where WiFi is needed.)
- Recognize the importance of mental health for staff, students and parents, with appropriate supports.

Dorothy Wigmore is a long-time health and safety specialist, trained in occupational hygiene, ergonomics, "stress" and education. A Canadian, she has worked also in the U.S. and Mozambique. Her focus is on solving job-related hazards through prevention and worker participation.



The most effective protection against a hazard is the elimination of the hazard. This National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) graphic identifies protections from most effective to least effective.

PPE IS THE LEAST EFFECTIVE PROTECTION

The most effective protections cover everyone. They don't depend on an individual's behavior, knowledge or protective gear that must fit. In this pandemic, effective measures include:

- Using outdoor spaces
- Fewer people in every room
- Barriers
- Physical distancing (at least six feet until the local case rate is very low)—sometimes with strategic placement of furniture
- Properly maintained ventilation providing all-fresh or well-filtered air
- Portable air-purifying machines with HEPA filters

Districts also need good sick leave and anti-retaliation policies, one-way "traffic" and universal easy access to hand-washing supplies and spaces. Everyone needs time for the extra measures.

Personal protective equipment (PPE) limits harm to the **user**. Face coverings are **not** PPE, they are a helpful precaution that can protect **others** around the user. Workers will still need PPE (e.g., gloves, respirator when using toxic products).

EQUITY AND REAL PARTICIPATION MATTER TOO

Effective measures cost money. Without sufficient funds, many school districts cannot do what's needed, creating serious equity issues. They come to light when workers, unions, parents and communities are real partners in **all** planning, implementation and evaluation of reopening plans, policies and procedures. They must be engaged, educated and comfortable speaking truth to power.

NJEA members also can use their collective bargaining agreements (*njea.org/planning-for-back-to-school*), the state's indoor air quality standard (*https://bit.ly/njdohiaq*), and their right to refuse without retaliation—be sure to consult with your association representative and local president before acting. Members need information and training to do this effectively.

Resources

NJEA, Education recovery plan: *njea.org/njea-releases-education-recovery-plan*

New Jersey Department of Education, The Road Back. Restart and recovery plan for education: *nj.gov/education/reopening/NJDOETheRoadBack.pdf.*

Coalition for Healthier Schools and WEC. National call to action. *https://bit.ly/3chscta*

American Federation of Teachers, A plan to safely reopen America's schools and communities, other resources: *aft.org/coronavirus*

University of Minnesota Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy: *cidrap.umn.edu*