



County.Administrator@ontariocountyny.gov
www.ontariocountyny.gov

Ontario County Office of County Administrator

Municipal Building
20 Ontario Street
Canandaigua, New York 14424
(585) 396-4400

Chris DeBolt
County Administrator
Brian Young
Deputy County Administrator
Cindy Abraszek
Confidential Secretary to the
County Administrator

News Release

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For more information, contact:

Chris DeBolt, County Administrator
Christopher.DeBolt@ontariocountyny.gov
585-396-4400

Ontario County Leaders Urge Patience from Students and Parents

Canandaigua, NY – February 25, 2021 Ontario County today urged patience from both students and parents as the calls for students to return to 100% in-person instruction increase. “We understand the frustration of the students, their parents, and our school partners regarding the inability of schools to accommodate 100% in-person instruction while adhering to the current guidelines.” Said County Administrator Chris DeBolt.

The new Federal Administration has made aspirational policy statements regarding wanting students to return to in-person instruction by early spring. Unfortunately, neither the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) nor New York State Education Department (NYSED) have changed or updated their guidance relating to school operations to make this possible. Local school districts are still operating under the guidelines released in the summer of 2020 which require masking and six (6) foot distancing of staff and students within schools. Without modifications to these guidelines by the State and/or Federal governments, schools do not have the physical space required to accommodate a return to 100% in-person instruction.

County Administrator DeBolt went on to say “There have been reports in the media recently that the State has provided the Local Health Departments the discretion to make decisions about guidelines for school operation, that is simply not true. It was confirmed to us just late last week by the State that Local Health Departments do not have the ability to issue guidance not in accordance with existing NYSDOH and NYSED guidance. It would also be inadvisable for a local school district to conduct operations that are not in accordance with the existing guidelines. While we are all frustrated with the remote and hybrid instruction models, the safety of the students and staff within our school communities must be the top priority.”

Ontario County Public Health Director Mary Beer also added that “Now is not the time to be pulling back on the public health measures that have been effective in producing the recent reduction in positivity rates, case counts and hospitalizations we have seen over the last few weeks. Just today, we were informed by the Governor that a case of the new U.K. COVID-19 variant has been confirmed within Ontario County. Until more of the population is able to be vaccinated and we understand the dynamics of the U.K. and other emerging viral variants, we have to stay vigilant and continue social distancing, wearing masks, limiting social gatherings and practicing good hand hygiene to prevent another surge in cases like the one we are just starting to recover from.”

Local school Superintendents also stressed that they are providing the best instructional setting possible for their students under the current guidelines and that while they would all love to welcome their school community back in person, they cannot do so until the applicable State and Federal guidelines are amended to make that possible.

“School districts have proven they can rise to the challenge and operate safely. With the arrival of the vaccine and our infection trends moving in the right direction, we would welcome the opportunity to fully reopen and we urge our Governor and NYSDOH to revise the guidance document to allow for it. Let the science and data drive our decisions. If infections rise again, we can shift back but we’d like the opportunity to try to fully reopen.” - *Jamie Farr, Canandaigua City School District*

"While our goal is to safely move from the hybrid model of instruction to fully in-person learning, there are State and Federal requirements that prevent us from being able to do so at this time. I am thankful for the wonderful and supportive partnership we have with our Ontario County Administrators and Department of Public Health. Because of them, nearly 80% of our staff at Red Jacket, who wanted the vaccine, have received a COVID-19 vaccination." - *Charlene Dehn, Manchester-Shortsville Central School District*

"Since the onset of COVID-19, we have seen different metrics used to close down our schools. The Victor CSD is asking for metrics to determine if we can safely reduce social distancing requirements so we can re-open fully. We ask that the state provide definitive parameters based on applicable data-based measures, so districts know when it is safe to reduce the requirement from six feet to three feet." - *Timothy Terranova, Victor Central School District*

“We have appreciated the assistance our local Departments of Health have given us throughout the pandemic. We feel that it is fair and equitable for all schools to have one set of directions and metrics come from the NYS Health Department and hope that they will give us a chance to be successful with reduced physical distancing, as other states have begun to do.” - *Dr. Christopher Brown, Marcus Whitman Central School District.*

"The Bloomfield Central School Districts top priority is to ensure that our students, faculty and staff are in the safest environment we can create. We feel a deep commitment to ensuring that our students, faculty, staff, and the families they go home to, are safe. We continue to actively promote the use of social distancing, the use of masks, the importance of frequent handwashing and we remain vigilant in our use of and adherence to all recommended cleaning measures. While the safety of everyone is our top priority, we are also committed to maximizing in person learning opportunities for all students. It is our hope that we will soon be able to have ALL students back with us safely five days a week. Until we receive adjusted health guidelines that might make that easier to accomplish, we will continue to seek ways to make safe in person learning happen under the current health guidelines that we must operate under. I continue to appreciate the patience and support our community has shown for our School District since the start of this pandemic. The support and cooperation we have seen from our community is an example of what makes our District such a wonderful place for our students to be." - *Andy Doell, Bloomfield Central School District*

"While there is much discussion, anticipation and aspiration to safely reopen schools fully, school districts are required to operate under the guidance from the state which provided the framework for development of our reopening models. We could not be more grateful for the partnership and collaboration with our local Department of Health to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic experience. We are confident that when the data and metrics support a shift in the guidance allowing for relaxed measures in our districts, we will be positioned to safely bring back students for 100% in person learning." - Bridget Ashton, Honeoye Central School District

"Midlakes remains committed to maximizing in-person instruction in the safest possible manner, under the applicable guidance from Governor Andrew Cuomo, the New York State Department of Health, and the New York State Education Department. We look forward to updated guidance that supports the safe delivery of increased in-person instruction. Sharing in the frustrations of our students and parents, we are prepared to work as quickly and safely as possible to respond to any changes." - Matt Sickles, Midlakes School District

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