

The Virus Isn't Going Away, So We Need to Get Back in School

By Richard Norman Rickey

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The Covid-19 pandemic, we now realize, is going to be endemic: an ongoing threat to the health of all our citizens, and thus our students and teachers. Here we are, seven months into this world wide circus of public health follies, and no closer to a proven path that keeps the spread at bay. This is a very tricky and highly adaptive virus. And hope for an effective miracle vaccine will face the skepticism of the anti-vaccination mob, a growing movement that already threatened the health of our schools before this pandemic hit.

To imagine that we can return to our prior normal at some point this school year feels increasingly like wishful thinking. Pausing in-person education for another school semester, or longer, would be devastating to your children. Reclaiming the academic losses from last school year, using remote only instruction, will be a substantial challenge for our teachers. While Orenda Education schools are leaders in using technology, and our families have told us that we made the transition to on-line learning better than most school districts, our position has always been that technology is not a sufficient substitute for a great teacher, and a class of engaged and excited pupils.

Bringing our teachers and students back to our schools now seems like the right thing to do---not because the virus isn't serious, it is, but that it will take many more months, possibly another year or more before the threat is mitigated. And having one or more positive tests on any one of our campuses is not indicative that we made a mistake to re-open. Creating a perfectly safe school will take a very long time, and may be unrealistic. But we can't just stop learning until the virus disappears. That is even more risky now that we know we are in for a long extended period of living with this pandemic.

Based on the mounting evidence that this virus is going to remain with us, and after consulting with local health department officials, epidemiologists, the Texas Education Agency and our faculty and staff, we announced back in June our intention to reopen in-person instruction in early September. Opening our schools as safely as possible to in-person learning, hinge on developing safeguards for the health and safety of our campus communities. Fostering a community culture of safety and caring is essential. Our planning has led to mandatory temperature checks, hybrid classrooms, cohort groups, no large dining or gatherings, more outside activities, daily comprehensive sanitation, mask wearing, and personal hygiene measures.

Regardless of how many families chose to drop their children off at our school door steps, children and teachers can't stay isolated forever. We are called to educate. We can't let the latest pandemic scare us into the false assumption that there won't be serious negative ramifications from hiding in our safe bunkers until the virus has run its course. As parents, we will face many moments of anxiety: seeing our children off to their first day of kindergarten, first

bike ride without the training wheels, marriage. We all must agree to make decisions in the best interest of the children. For most children, being back in school is in their best interest, even during this latest pandemic. As teachers and administrators we have a duty to do all we can to make it happen.