

# Virginia General Assembly



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## **Republican Legislators Call on Governor Northam to Prioritize Five Days of In-School Learning this Fall**

*Doctor, Lawyer, Nurse Practitioner, Teacher, School Board Member, Mom, and Dad – the job titles of the legislators who today laid out priorities to ensure students and teachers can return to the classroom safely and consistently*

**RICHMOND, July 8, 2020** – With just 62 days until Labor Day, the unofficial start of the 2020-2021 school year for most students in Virginia, a group of Republican legislators in Virginia are calling on Governor Ralph Northam to prioritize in-school learning five days a week for all students in Virginia, and calling for legislative changes and state investments to support that goal.

The request was made during a virtual press conference with: Senator Siobhan Dunnivant, an Ob-Gyn in Henrico; Senator Jill Vogel, a lawyer in Northern Virginia; Senator Jen Kiggans, a nurse practitioner in Virginia Beach; Delegate Carrie Coyner, a former member of the Chesterfield County School Board; and, Delegate Kirk Cox, a teacher in Chesterfield for 30 years before retiring. They were joined by Becky Hay, a parent in Virginia Beach who started the VA Back2School! Facebook group with over 20,000 members advocating for opening schools to the fullest extent possible.

During the press conference the legislators laid out policy and budget priorities to ensure schools can safely reopen their doors to students for consistent in-classroom learning. The priorities include:

- Policy Proposals:
  - Additional paid leave for teachers and staff for COVID-19 related issues
  - Immunity for school districts from lawsuits related to COVID-19
- Budget Items:
  - Funding for teacher pay raises
  - Additional funding for at-risk schools
  - Increased funding for Virtual Virginia
  - Expanded health/nursing services
  - Increased funding to help schools reopen

“Virginia’s number one priority should be five days of classroom for all students of all ages,” said Dunnivant. “There is no doubt we are facing a serious public health crisis but because of a lack of leadership from the Northam Administration we have school districts scrambling to figure out what to do and scared to bring students back to school. The updated guidance issued this week doesn’t help.

The science, research, and numbers show convincingly that all students should be back learning in the classroom on a consistent and regular basis this fall. It's clear that children rarely transmit COVID-19 between one another and adults, and the negative impacts of a disrupted school year will far outweigh the risk of bringing all children back into the classroom in September."

The legislators today called on Governor Northam to clearly give school districts a roadmap to reopening five days a week for in-school learning on the first day of school. [Updated guidelines](#) issued this week by Virginia's State Health Commissioner and Superintendent of Public Instruction still leave too much confusion about what is expected of school districts from an instruction standpoint, and what phase Virginia will be in on the first day of school. It also remains unclear whether the guidelines are recommendations or requirements for school districts.

In June, the [American Association of Pediatrics](#) (AAP) issued their guidance for schools, stating, "The AAP strongly advocates that all policy considerations for the coming school year should start with a goal of having students physically present in school.... No child or adolescents should be excluded from school unless required in order to adhere to local public health mandates or because of unique medical needs."

Virginia's COVID-19 cases among 0-19-year-olds continue to track what nationwide the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and researchers are seeing – that children are much less likely to contract and spread the disease than adults. Of the 7,156 confirmed cases in Virginia among 0-19 year olds, which represent 10% of the total cases in Virginia, only 116 hospitalizations have occurred with zero deaths, according to the [Virginia Department of Health](#) (as of 7/8/20). At the same time, over 1,000 childcare facilities statewide have remained, most serving only children of essential workers, according to the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation. Of the centers that remained open, only one outbreak has occurred with no hospitalizations, according to the Virginia Department of Health.

"As an ob-gyn I have spent the last four months counseling hundreds of women on how to safely raise their newborn babies during this pandemic," said Dunnivant. "As a mother, I have seen the importance of school on a child's wellbeing and future. And as a working mother, I know first-hand the need for a safe, consistent place for children to go during the day and after school. The governor's lack of a plan for our children and families is leaving all Virginians behind, and putting the careers, livelihoods, and futures of far too many people at risk."

The legislators today called for legislation during the upcoming Special Session that would give school districts immunity from lawsuits over COVID-19 issues. These legislators have heard from many school districts in their legislative districts that are unsure of how to implement the guidelines from Governor Northam and how to navigate potential liabilities of bringing children back to school this fall.

"As a working mom, I sympathize with the concerns of contracting COVID-19 and the risk of exposure at school," said Vogel. "Too many school districts are being forced to make decisions because of a fear of lawsuits rather than what's best for children. Virginia must have policies that protects our teachers, protects our students, and protects our school districts. By implementing immunity policy for school districts, you can allow school districts to focus on how to safely reopen their doors five days a week rather than making decisions around potential legal actions."

The legislators also advocated for additional paid leave for teachers and staff because of COVID-19 issues. This would allow teachers and staff to take time off if they contract COVID-19 or need to care for a child or other family member who gets COVID-19.

“The reality is that being in the classroom on a normal schedule five days a week with the same kids all day is less risky than a disjointed schedule where they spend the days out of school with different groups of people” said Vogel. “We absolutely must also give parents the flexibility to choose remote learning if they are concerned about sending their child to school, or if they have a medically fragile child or family member and don’t want to risk exposure at school. But online learning should be a choice, not a mandate from the school.”

“School districts need leadership from our governor, and instead they have been told to figure out their own plans,” said Cox. “This is a time for creativity, flexibility, and new approaches to learning. School districts have been left hamstrung by confusing policies and guidelines. At the end of the day, we are leaving behind Virginia’s children who are going to have an entire school year disrupted. Remote learning should not be the end all be all, but rather a choice for students.”

During the Special Session, legislators from today’s press conference called for budget priorities to ensure classrooms have the ability to reopen. This includes: pay raises for teachers to help bring more teachers back to the classroom for the 2020-2021 school year; funding for at-risk students and schools through programs such as Communities in Schools so these schools have the support needed when they reopen; funding for more school counselors to help students address the learning losses that have already occurred and those that might occur during the upcoming school year because of COVID-19; increased funding for Virtual Virginia so every child has equitable access to online learning; expanded health and nursing services to address issues related to COVID-19; and, funding to help schools open so they can acquire what is needed to make sure children, teachers, and staff are safe while at school.

“Children need to be in the classroom five days a week and we need to give schools the tools to make this possible,” said Cox. “As a former teacher I know first-hand the stress of putting together lesson plans, grading papers, gathering supplies, and preparing for testing, and sympathize with every teacher who now has to implement CDC and state guidelines on top of everything else. By prioritizing K-12 education during the special session, we are prioritizing Virginia’s children, teachers and families.”

“Children are the least likely age group to contract or spread COVID-19, but they are the ones being most disrupted by the guidelines and procedures being implemented by state officials,” said Kiggans. “I sympathize with the moms and dads who are scrambling to find childcare or play a dual role as provider and educator for their family. Our children already had a semester of school disrupted, and now we are looking at even greater disruption this coming school year for a population that is rarely impacted by COVID-19.”

“I want to see our students and staff go back safely with reasonable precautions in place,” said Kiggans. “I support school choice and continue to advocate for a schooling model that works best for our students, staff, and families. We shouldn’t be forcing parents to choose between their jobs and their children, and instead need policy solutions to help schools reopen safely. Our school districts need leadership from our governor, and our schools need the resources to be innovative during this time.”

“Right now, we are facing a public health crisis we know how to track, how to contain, and how to live with,” said Coyner. “Not fully opening schools creates multiple health crises with long-lasting, detrimental impacts on our children and our parents. We can’t measure the increased mental health issues, lack of access to food, widening of educational gaps between low-income and minority students and students with disabilities, increases in child abuse and neglect and the lack of reporting provided by schools, greater family economic instability due to balancing work and children at home, and the gap in childcare availability and affordability.”

Having schools open in a hybrid schedule will actually increase the exposure of children to more people that could infect them. Keeping students in cohorts within their classrooms for five days a week would actually reduce the risk of infection. If a child is in school two days a week with one group of children and in childcare the other three days a week they are exposed to at least two groups who may infect them. Additionally, many parents are already having trouble finding or affording additional childcare, further straining an already difficult time in many households.

“Resorting to online learning because that is what the school districts think they have to do means that Virginia’s low-income and minority students will be left farther behind their peers,” said Coyner. “We talk in Virginia about the importance of third grade reading – if a child doesn’t read on grade level by the third grade, they likely would never read on grade level and fall farther behind. If this is a child’s second or third grade year and they’re already struggling to keep up, especially after already having a semester of school disrupted, we are at risk of having an entire age group of children who will never be on grade level. Failure to reopen schools this fall could have a lifelong impact on a child’s trajectory.”

With Virtual Virginia online education soon available for all grades K-12, any child can learn through high quality virtual education if they choose. Previously Virtual Virginia was available for 6,000 students in high school. It will now be available for all students giving them a comprehensive online learning option for the 2020-2021 school year.

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