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Infectious disease scientist with 4 kids in public schools calls for classroom reopening



Dick Uliano

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A Montgomery County, Maryland, infectious disease scientist and mother with four children in the public schools says it's time to reopen school buildings to in-person learning.

Dr. Margery Smelkinson, an immunologist, has been fighting to restore in-classroom instruction and she was part of a coalition of parents and students who met with Governor Larry Hogan last week, before [Governor Hogan announced that he's urging all public school systems to offer at least some in-person learning by March 1.](#)

The coalition said that Maryland is one of only six states in the nation with little to no in-person instruction.

"The science shows that transmission in schools is low. We are not asking to put anyone's life in danger, if we thought there was an actual risk we would not be fighting this hard," said Dr. Smelkinson who has children in kindergarten, 1st, 3rd and 4th grades.

Parents across the region have worried about the physical and emotional impact that remote learning may be having on children, some of whom have not seen the inside of a classroom since March 2020.

Smelkinson said the consequences of distance learning are evident in her own children.

“I can definitely see that they’re not learning as much as they did last year, they’re disengaged ... they miss their friends a lot ... they’re really suffering socially a lot,” she said. “There’s also a lot of snacking that’s going on, a lot of sedentary lifestyle, they’re just staring at their screens all the time.”

Many teachers have expressed grave concerns about returning to classrooms, particularly those with underlying conditions or those who have family members with underlying conditions that put them at risk of severe illness, if infected with COVID-19.

But Dr. Smelkinson said that research in several states over the past 10 months is clear: Even in communities with high transmission rates, schools could be open and not contribute to community spread, if safety protocols are maintained.

“My view is that we don’t have to wait for everyone to be vaccinated or even all the staff to be vaccinated before we open our schools,” she said. “We can get those teachers back in there and keep them safe ... masking, distancing, hand hygiene — those kinds of things ... We do need to open our schools, but also have strong protocols in place,” Smelkinson said.

The governor’s call to reopen at least some in-person instruction in March was met with skepticism from officials at Montgomery County Public Schools.

The school system called the governor’s message “abrupt” and said it was “deeply worried” about the change in the state’s guidance, which it said it will assess and will continue to work with county and state public health officials.

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