

Massachusetts officials wants elementary students back in classrooms by April

By Katie Lannan

State House News Service

The state's education commissioner wants elementary school students back in the classroom full-time in April, as part of a plan to phase out remote learning that officials announced Tuesday as Massachusetts approaches the one-year anniversary of the initial March 2020 school closures intended to mitigate spread of COVID-19.

The announcements met quick pushback from the state's largest teachers union, which has been calling for earlier vaccine access for educators, and from school committees, which said decisions involved in reopenings are best handled at the local level.

Most schools – around 80 percent of districts – have reintroduced at least some in-person learning over the past year, relying on protocols like mask-wearing and distancing, Gov. Charlie Baker said. The remaining districts that are teaching entirely remotely serve about 400,000 students, he said.

“Most of them haven’t been in the classroom since last March,” Baker said. “With COVID cases and hospitalizations continuing to decline and vaccines well underway, it’s time to set our sights on eliminating remote learning by April, and starting with elementary schools. Districts need clear direction about what will count as acceptable learning time as the commonwealth moves forward.”

Commissioner Jeff Riley told members of the Board of

Elementary and Secondary Education that he will ask them next month for the authority to determine when hybrid and remote school models no longer count for learning hours.

Riley said he would pursue a phased approach with the goal of getting as many kids as possible back into classrooms by the end of this school year, focusing first on elementary school students and then on older grades.

He said he would work closely with state health officials and medical experts, and that parents would still have the option to choose remote learning for their child through the end of the year.

There would also be a waiver process for districts that might need to move more incrementally, Riley said, giving the example of a fully remote district that could seek to transition to a hybrid model because an immediate shift to a totally in-person format would be a “hard lift.”

“At some point, as health metrics continue to improve, we will need to take the remote and hybrid learning models off the table and return to a traditional school format,” Riley told the board.

Conversations about school reopenings and different learning models have been fraught over the past several months, involving a balance of various factors including concerns around viral transmission, students’ social and emotional development, districts’ ability to adapt existing school buildings for pandemic-era distancing and ventilation protocols, the child care needs of working parents, and the equity issues that arise when some districts have not been able to return to in-person learning.

Teachers are not yet able to receive COVID-19 vaccines in Massachusetts – they’re part of the next group that will become eligible, and school personnel have been pushing for earlier prioritization. Citing comments from White House

officials, Riley said educator vaccination is one important mitigation strategy but not a prerequisite for returning to school.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance says that vaccinating teachers and school staff “can be considered one layer of mitigation and protection.”

The CDC guidance says that schools providing in-person instruction “should prioritize two mitigation strategies” – the “universal and correct” wearing of masks by all students, teachers and staff, and maximizing physical distancing of at least six feet “to the greatest extent possible.”

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s guidance for Massachusetts schools uses a minimum distance of three feet when masking and all other mitigation is in place, in keeping with a World Health Organization standard, and recommends six feet of distance when possible.

“We’re sticking with our guidance, which is three feet, and if you can do more, please do so,” Riley said Tuesday. “I think what we’ve seen even here in Massachusetts is there are districts that are currently operating at three feet, there certainly are special education programs that are operating at three feet, and anecdotally we haven’t seen any difference between three and six feet.”

Massachusetts Teachers Association President Merrie Najimy raised the issue of distancing in a video interview with WBZ-TV, in which she also said vaccination for educators “is not in sight.”

“To have full in-person learning contradicts the science of six feet of distancing, so what the commissioner is doing is waving a magic wand, saying the problem is solved and then implementing unilateral authority and usurping the decisions of every school committee,” she said.

The Massachusetts Association of School Committees said in a statement that its members hope to work with state officials “to provide a reasonable framework for getting students back to school in a way that is expeditious and inspires confidence that the decisions are made in the interests of safety of students and school personnel.”

“We remain mindful that, while most parents are eager to see their children return to in-person instruction, there remain questions of immunization, overall school safety and budget that need to be resolved,” the statement said. “These decisions should remain in the hands of the people who are overseeing individual schools and school districts: school superintendents and school committees in consultation with parents and community members.”

Ed Lambert, the executive director of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, praised Riley’s plan as “an important step toward ensuring equal educational opportunities” and said that in-person learning “should be pursued vigorously when and where safe.”

“Substantial federal funding will go a long way in both helping schools open and helping them put in place strategies to address student learning loss,” Lambert said. “Nearly a \$1 billion in federal relief has already been made available to schools, with more federal money likely. We’ve got to leverage every penny of that money to do what is best for students which includes getting students back in school.”

Before Riley announced his plans to education board members, the panel heard during its public comment session from Dr. Shira Doron, an infectious diseases physician and epidemiologist at Tufts Medical Center.

Dirone said that her experience managing COVID-19 transmission prevention at the hospital and providing guidance to federal courts and local schools has shown her that mitigation

protocols like masking, distancing, hygiene, surface disinfection and staying home when sick are effective. She said there is “broad consensus in the medical community that we need to bring students back to school.”

“We’ll never have zero risk in school when it comes to COVID-19 or any danger, infectious or otherwise,” she said. “We simply have to change our mindset when it comes to risk tolerance. The risk in school is low. The risk to our children from being out of school is growing.”