

Massachusetts school restart triggering range of emotions among students

By Katie Lannan

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With peers who sometimes lack access to masks and hand sanitizer, classrooms that don't always have windows, and a city whose COVID-19 case rate is the highest in the state, Chelsea High School student Victoria Stutto said she would not feel safe going back to school in-person at all this year.

Chelsea's schools are starting the academic year with full remote instruction. Stutto, 17, said she hopes to see changes from what she experienced in the spring, when she found learning from home "next to impossible."

Stutto, speaking on a Zoom call hosted by the Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance, said her father died about a month after her school and others across the state suddenly transitioned to remote learning as the pandemic took hold.

She said only some of the teachers were understanding of the challenges she faced, and the process as a whole was disorganized.

"I couldn't focus on any of the lessons, and the dysfunctionality of it all, I just couldn't balance it with my everyday life," Stutto said.

Stutto and others who spoke during the virtual press conference illustrated the tension facing many students, teachers, and families across the state as the back-to-school season arrives. While wary about the health implications of a physical return to the classroom, parents and students on the

call also outlined concerns with remote schooling, including difficulty connecting with teachers, technology problems and social isolation.

Stutto and another rising senior in Chelsea, Katy Ochoa, said that schools should look at each student's individual situation and suggested they name a point person kids could reach out to with their personal needs and problems around remote learning.

Araceli Flores, a 16-year-old Everett High School student, said her mom, who has a medical condition, is worried about her risk of contracting COVID-19 if Flores and her younger sister were to go back to school in-person. Flores said she, too, wonders how students would be able to feel safe.

But, Flores said, she felt "like we didn't learn anything" this past spring, and her sister, a fourth grader, told her "that going to school, she would learn better."

Gov. Charlie Baker has advocated for schools to resume at least some in-person education in communities where the risk of COVID-19 transmission is low, pointing to the social and emotional needs of students who have been out of the classroom for almost six months and the difficulties inherent with teaching things like reading from a distance.

The administration rolled out a series of safety protocols that districts must adhere to if they do repopulate classrooms, including mask-wearing, social distancing and sanitation measures. The choice to pursue in-person schooling, remote education or a hybrid model fell to individual districts.

Baker announced Thursday that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is launching a public awareness campaign highlighting what steps are being taken to reopen schools safely. A new website aims to answer families' questions and features a video of doctors discussing the status of COVID-19

in Massachusetts.

"Over the summer, the Department worked with many stakeholders and medical experts to carefully develop detailed guidance to reopen schools safely, and superintendents, teachers and staff worked hard to implement those health and safety requirements," Elementary and Secondary Education Commissioner Jeffrey Riley said in a statement. "We now need to rely on families, students and the other members of the public to do their part to prevent the spread of COVID-19 so that our kids can get back to school."

In Boston, the city's schools are starting remotely on Sept. 21. Later in the fall, families will be given the option to have their students gradually return for some in-person instruction, in a hybrid model, if public health metrics hold.

Janina Rackard plans to keep Jay'dha, her 12-year-old daughter, at home. Rackard said she thinks more thought needs to be put into safety precautions and that the coronavirus "is just not contained."

"I am not going to let my daughter be that subject, that test subject," she said.

Another Boston parent, Suleika Soto, said she was choosing a hybrid model for her children, ages 9 and 12. She's still afraid of the unknown and wants clearer communication from the school district, she said, but needs to return to work.

"There is no real child care out there, so school's my next best option," she said. "I know this is high risk, but I'm kind of stuck."

Soto said she'd feel "more secure" about sending her kids back to school if COVID-19 testing were mandatory.

"I know that flu shots are going to be required from what I hear, I know physicals are required, so why not put a COVID

test in, as some sort of requirement for going back into the buildings?" she said.