

# **New Bedford Mayor Mitchell: Full School Reopening Poses “Unacceptable Risk”**

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Returning to a fully in-person education model in New Bedford Public Schools would create an “unacceptable risk of an outbreak,” Mayor Jon Mitchell warned in a formal address Thursday where he also touted the city’s local leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Districts are weighing how they will prepare for educating K-12 students starting next months, facing tough decisions compounded by safety risks and concerns about student well-being. Mitchell said in his State of the City speech that city officials are developing plans and “should have some announcements next week.”

“We are mindful that our children’s education has been severely disrupted and that remote instruction, even when the necessary technology is available to all students, is a poor substitute for the real thing,” Mitchell said, according to a copy of his remarks. “A full reopening of schools at this point, however, would pose in my view an unacceptable risk of an outbreak. The reason is essentially that there isn’t enough room or staff to separate out students sufficiently to lower the risk. Feeding and transporting students also become complicated for similar reasons.”

Mitchell urged residents to accept that the highly infectious coronavirus will continue to pose threats for the foreseeable future, cautioning against rushing to return to pre-pandemic norms and calling a second wave “inevitable” based on the history of past pandemics.

Through Wednesday, 135 New Bedford residents had died as a result of COVID-19 and more than 2,300 tested positive. The city has also felt acute economic impacts, with its unemployment rate rising from about 5 percent in February to 24 percent in May, Mitchell said. The mayor praised city leaders for their targeted response, saying that “we didn’t wait around for the state or anyone else to tell us what we had to do.” He pointed to the conversion of closed nursing homes into dedicated COVID-19 care facilities and local contact tracing efforts.

“Governor Baker’s approach has been appropriately grounded in the statewide data, and there is much to be said for establishing city policies that are consistent with the rest of the State,” Mitchell said. “But sometimes, we have had to calibrate our approach in light of public health data specific to Greater New Bedford, and we will continue to do that.”