

Iowa Council for the Social Studies

Official Release

Iowa “Return to Learn”

August 6, 2020

The Iowa Council for the Social Studies (ICSS), the premier organization of Iowa Social Studies professionals, is highly concerned with recent executive actions on “Return to Learn” and the opening of school this fall. ICSS’s primary mission is to ensure that all students receive a high-quality Social Studies education; however, given the current state of the COVID-19 pandemic we also recognize that the safety of all participants in the education process is first and foremost for that learning to take place. Students have clearly shown for decades that one must feel safe before real learning can take place. Forcing students and staff back into crowded classrooms and hallways with all the new pressures that will be created is not a safe learning environment. Anyone who has spent a day in a school recognizes the impossibility of social distancing and social and psychological pressures that these new issues will create. One argument consistently presented by proponents of required person-to-person learning is the role of the school as a center of mental health. The pressures that accompany this pandemic will only worsen, not lessen mental health issues for students and educators alike. Although parents have a choice, the pressure to send students to the classroom will be great on both students and parents. In the classroom, the constant worry about who is sick, the pressures coming from students who refuse to follow safety procedures such as wearing a mask, and the public stigmas resulting from something as simple as a cough will create unique and highly difficult challenges. We cannot ignore that just one student, teacher or family member who contracts COVID-19, let alone one person dying, is too many. To argue that it is better to send the students in person because the morbidity and mortality rates are not as high does not refute the risk. Studies have shown even asymptomatic adults and children can cause sickness in others.

We are also greatly concerned about the “Evaluating Sick Students and Staff” plan. If one looks carefully at the procedures, under Staff it clearly states the following: “Staff may be considered official critical personnel and can be allowed to return to work if there are staffing shortages as long as they remain asymptomatic.” In short, carriers of the disease can be forced into the classroom.

Not only are we concerned with the safety of all those returning to school, but as social studies educators, we are worried about additional aspects of the process. Schools were mandated to prepare “Return to Learn” plans that required hours of preparation and sometimes at new costs to the taxpayer. Those who participated have worked for what was best for their communities. Throughout the crisis, Governor Reynolds has made recommendations but has refused since the very beginning to “force” actions. Many times, the Governor has stated that we must count on

the good judgment of Iowans to make decisions citing local control and personal best practices along with a belief in limited government and checks and balances. However, the Proclamations of July 7 and July 30, along with the Governor's comment on August 4, reduced local choice and the practice of limited government has seemingly disappeared forcing all students back into the classroom along with all educators. Why take away the alternative options?

Summary and Recommendation

We are recommending that common sense local choice be returned to local districts with all options on the table including virtual learning or hybrid approaches without unnecessary bureaucratic regulations. We also recommend for those schools who choose to return to the classroom, that safety precautions be ensured, such as the wearing of masks. This recommendation is not a politicized response. It is about doing what is right for all students, parents, and educators in Iowa. The ICSS is made up of conservatives, moderates and liberals. It is made up of Republicans, Democrats, and many other affiliated and non-affiliated citizens. We are concerned about the process and doing what is right. Schools should be a safe place to learn--forced full return to the classroom plans simply cannot provide this safety. We should be centers of learning—not daycares, not economic institutions or institutions of some other capacity, and having to jump through bureaucratic hoops to temporarily change the learning model when safer options are available is unreasonable. Iowa social studies educators are innovators and highly capable of providing high quality instruction, and they will provide the best instruction in whatever format their community decides is best. We recommend a common sense approach that promotes learning AND the physical and mental health of ALL students, parents, educators and their families.

Catherine Mein, ICSS President

ICSS Executive Board Members