

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS, CALIFORNIA POLICY STATEMENT

School is the essential business of childhood.

California Pediatricians urge policy-makers to prioritize reopening in-person elementary schools as the most important act we can take to protect the health, safety, and social-emotional well-being of California's children.

- **Opening in-person schools provides tremendous value to California's children**

In-person schools provide more than just academics. In addition to reading, writing and math, students learn social and emotional skills, get exercise, and have access to mental health support and other services that cannot be provided with online learning. For many children, in-person schools are safe places to be while parents or guardians are working. For many families, in-person schools are where kids get healthy meals, access to the internet and other vital services. Children with disabilities and other special needs receive critically important assessments, services and support for their education that may be difficult or impossible to access remotely.

- **When in-person schools are closed, extremely uneven remote learning resources exacerbate the persistent racial and social inequities in our educational system**

The disparities in school funding, quality of school facilities, educational staffing, and resources for enriching curriculum between schools have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Families rely on in-person schools to provide child care; a safe, stimulating space for children to learn; opportunities for socialization; and access to school-based mental, physical, and nutritional health services. Without adequate support for families to access these services, disparities will likely worsen, especially for children who are English language learners, children with disabilities, children living in poverty, and children of African American/Black, Latinx/Hispanic, and Native American/Alaska Native origin.

- **California's 4-tiered color-coded system currently fails to appropriately prioritize in-person schools, in some cases permitting entities that present higher risk for transmission of COVID19 to open first**

Current evidence suggests elementary school children under age 10 are at far lower risk of contracting the virus or of contributing to its spread than are older youth and adults. Properly resourced, well-funded and with appropriate protections for teachers and staff, in-person schools for young children have opened safely across the world. Yet, California's 4-color tiered system stops all levels of schools, including elementary schools, from opening in-person while letting other entities open at reduced levels. (While there is a waiver system, evidence indicates that private schools and smaller, well-funded districts have been able to secure these, while for the most part larger public school districts have not.) For example, retail can open indoors at 25% in the "Purple Tier", while in-person schools must remain closed. In the "Red Tier", in-person schools must wait two weeks to open, while higher risk activities like indoor dining and movie theaters can open right away, potentially leading to increased spread of the virus, sabotaging any school reopening plans. In-person school openings should be treated as a top priority in each tier, accomplished as soon as is safely possible based on local public health guidance, with elementary schools phased-in first.

- **Policies to permit schools to open in-person first, when safe, must be accompanied by strong policies that support workers in higher-transmission risk settings who are still required to stay at home**

As in-person schools open first, workers adversely affected by pandemic closures in settings at risk of higher transmission (e.g., indoor dining) must be supported through state and local policies to maintain their housing, and provide adequate resources for food and other necessities.