

Navigating Uncertain Circumstances: Educator Concerns about Opening Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Georgia educators want to be in schools, serving students. They know that providing hands-on, interactive instruction and collaborating with colleagues helps students thrive. Educators' desire to be with their students is matched by their concerns about the health risks of the COVID-19 virus, particularly educators who are at high risk for poor health outcomes if they contract the virus. With school start dates quickly approaching, many lack confidence in districts' opening plans or do not have information about districts' anticipated action steps.

At the same time, educators have not had a chance to reconnect with each other or with building and district leaders to discuss reopening strategies, share concerns, collaborate on solutions, and build the trust necessary to navigate these unprecedented and deeply challenging circumstances. In a recent PAGE survey, more than 16,000 educators across Georgia shared their perspectives and concerns about opening schools. Their answers make clear that Georgia educators:

- Have little information about opening school plans.
 - Fifty-one percent of educators report their districts have released opening plans.
 - More than 52 percent of educators whose districts have released plans do not believe the plans are appropriately responsive to the risks of the virus. About 25 percent agree with the plans while nearly 23 percent are neutral on them.
- Are committed to but concerned about returning to the classroom.
 - Nearly 78 of all educators plan to return to school, about 19 percent are uncertain, and three percent report they will not return.
 - Approximately 30 percent of educators are high-risk for the coronavirus and are more uncertain about returning to the classroom.

- Need additional supports to provide effective online instruction.
 - Forty-four percent of teachers want training in providing engaging online instruction, and over a third want training in using online instructional technologies. Over 50 percent want high-quality online resources.
 - About 37 percent of educators have school-age or younger children and will require support if schools close again and they provide instruction from home.

In response to these findings, PAGE developed recommendations to help districts create opening plans that respond to the concerns raised by educators and preserve the health and safety of students and staff. The recommendations are outlined in a brief, which is available [here](#).

Survey Distribution

The survey was conducted June 26-July 8. A link to the survey was emailed to all PAGE members as well as members of the Georgia Association of School Nurses, which provided input into several survey questions. In total, 16,104 educators from 179 districts participated.

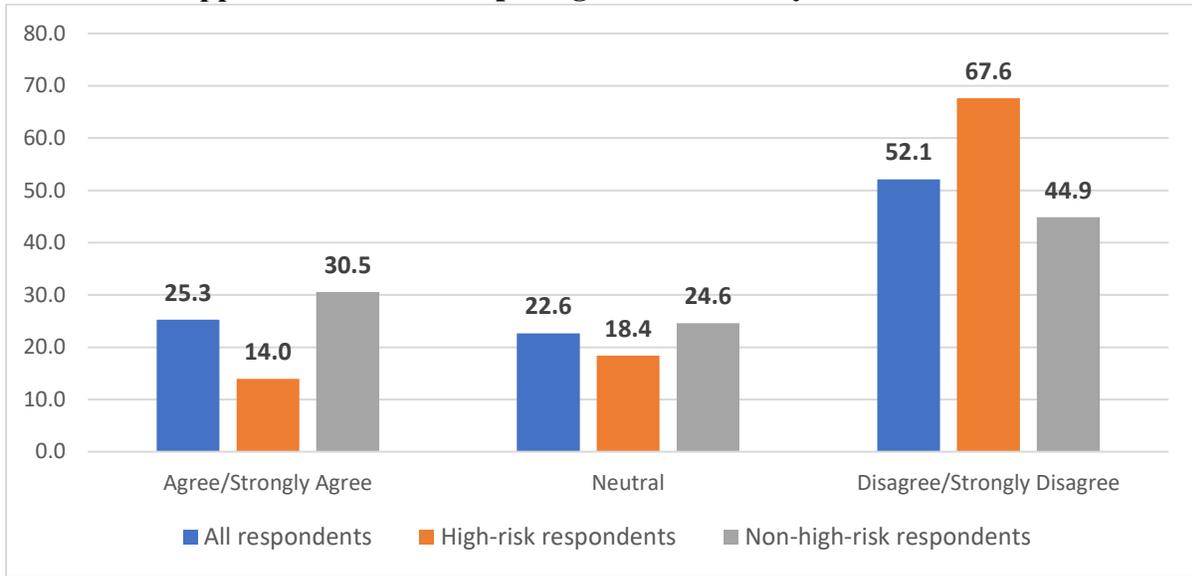
Information Gap

Educators have limited information about their districts' plans to open schools. Fifty-one percent reported that their districts released plans by July 8 when the survey closed. One factor that may extend the process of developing plans is the delayed passage of the state's Fiscal Year 2021 budget, which shapes districts' spending plans. Other considerations that may slow plan development are the evolving information about the virus and best practices for slowing its spread as well as the recent surge of coronavirus cases in many communities.

More than two-thirds of respondents say that their districts solicited their input into the development of opening plans. In addition, nurses have often been included in plan development, leveraging their medical knowledge with their experience in school operations. About half of the nurses who participated in the survey report a nurse serves on their districts' planning teams.

Districts' plans do not win high marks from most educators. While their perceptions varied by the risk the coronavirus poses to them, most educators in districts that have released plans do not think the plans respond appropriately to the risks of the virus.

Educators' Support for District Reopening Plans Varies by Risk Level



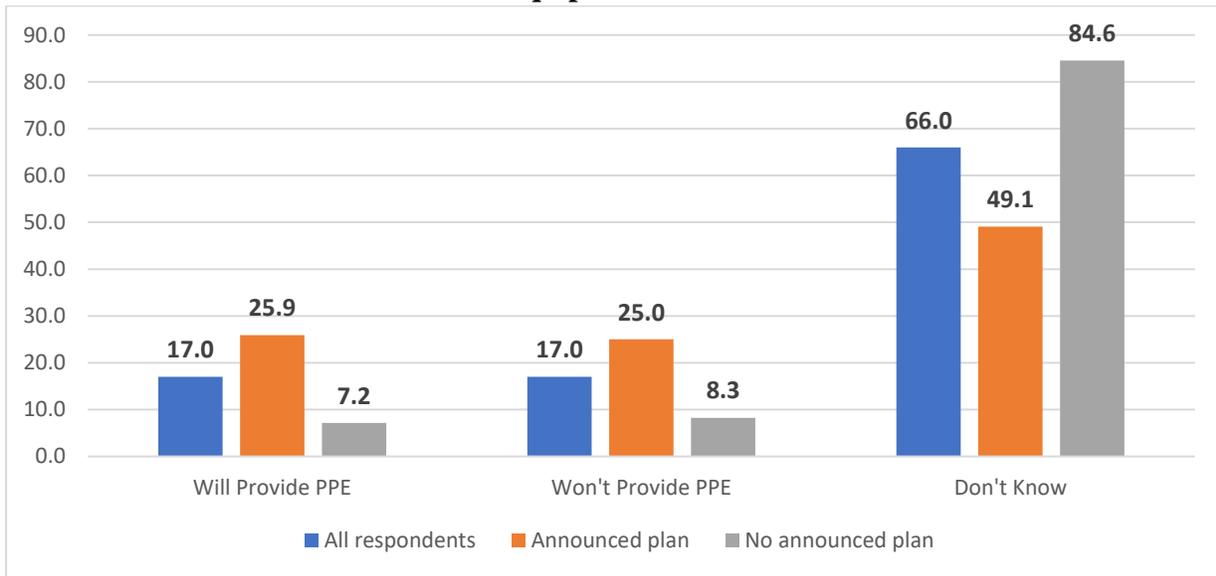
Lack of information about specific action steps may contribute to educators' perceptions of districts' opening plans. Many educators in districts that have released plans say there are not clear action steps to handle students and staff with possible or confirmed coronavirus diagnoses.

Clear Plan to Treat Students & Staff with Coronavirus

	Yes	No	Do Not Know
School-level administrator	34.0	40.9	25.1
Classroom teachers	21.6	51.0	27.4
Paraprofessional	21.0	34.6	44.4
Central office staff	28.0	45.2	26.9
School counselor/social worker/psychologist	21.8	51.3	26.9
Transportation	13.3	33.3	53.3
School nutrition	20.0	24.0	56.0
Administrative and support	24.2	43.9	31.8
School nurse	32.7	38.5	28.8
All respondents	22.6	48.3	29.2

Many educators know little about specific steps their districts will take even when districts have released plans. This information gap is a likely factor in their concerns about returning to school. Most educators do not know if their districts will provide staff with masks or other personal protective equipment (PPE).

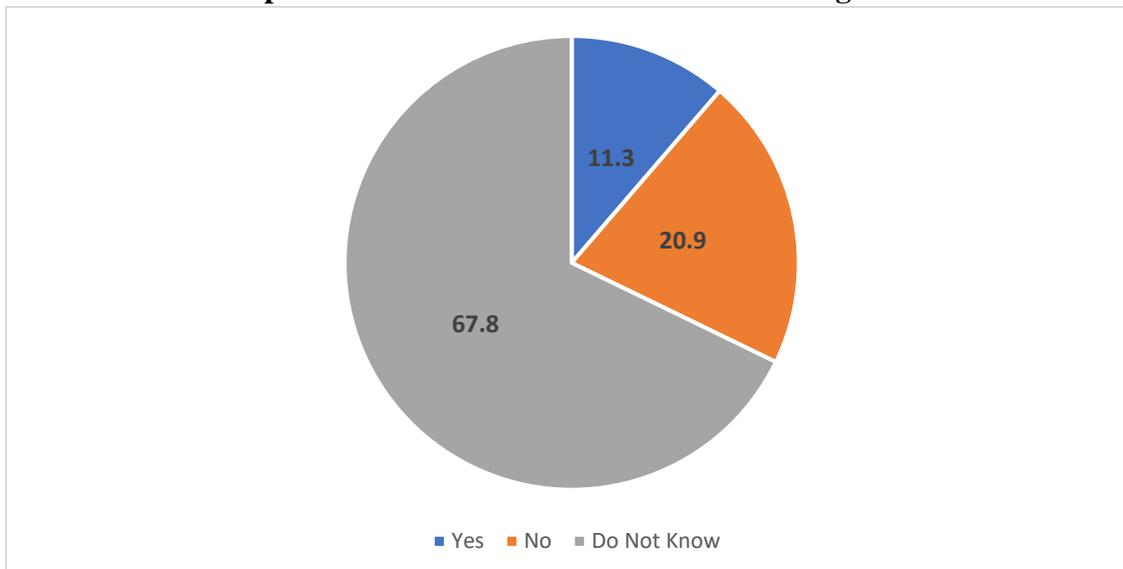
District Provide Personal Protective Equipment to Staff



Nearly 51 percent of educators in districts with announced plans say they do not know if districts will provide students with PPE. Approximately 88 percent of educators whose districts have not released reopening plans do not know if their districts will give students PPE.

Educators also lack information about how their districts will support students with special needs, are medically fragile, or are high-risk due to the virus. Even in districts that have released plans, there is considerable uncertainty about meeting these students' needs.

Educators Who Report Their Districts Have Plans for Serving Students with Extra Needs



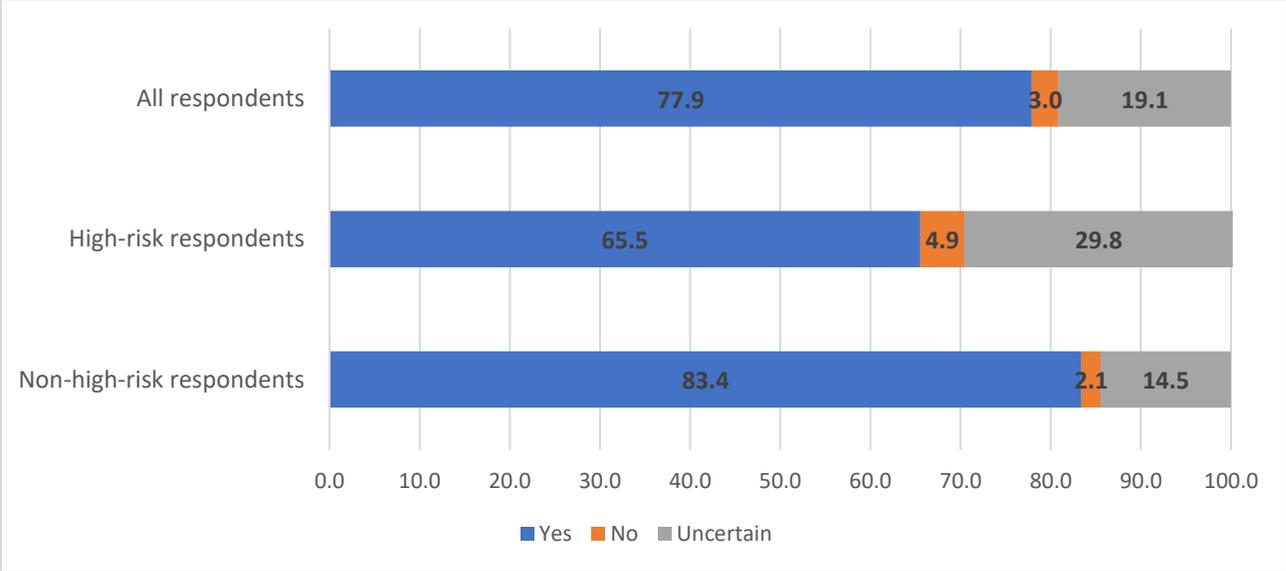
The lack of information about plans to serve students with extra needs may also signal the complexity of current circumstances and the challenges of serving these students safely.

Educator Commitment and Concern

Educators are deeply committed to their students, which was highlighted in the spring during statewide school closures. They shifted rapidly to provide remote instruction, maintained connections to students with phone and video calls, emails and texts, provided tech support for parents, distributed meals to students across communities, and more. Educator commitment is also evident in their willingness to return to classrooms with the health risks COVID-19 presents. Nearly 78 percent of respondents say they are coming back to schools. However, 19 percent are uncertain, and three percent have chosen not to come back.

Educators’ decisions to leave or their uncertainty about staying is connected in part to their level of risk. Those who self-identify as being high-risk are more likely to not come back or are uncertain about doing so.

Educators’ Decision to Return to the Classroom

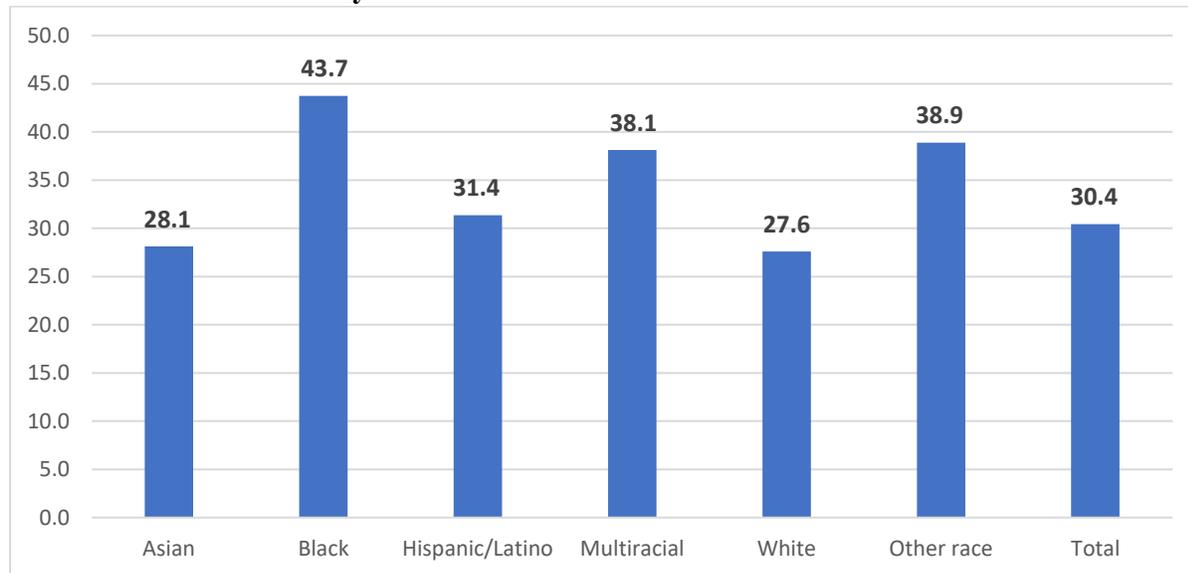


Approximately 30 percent of educators self-identify as being at high-risk for COVID-19. District employees in some categories are more likely to be higher risk than others. Nearly half of transportation workers are high-risk, and about 36 percent of school nutrition staff are high-risk. In addition, 44.3 percent of educators report a member of their household is high-risk. In total, approximately 53 percent of educators report that they or a member of their household is high-risk.

The likelihood of educators self-identifying as high-risk increases with their years of experience. Twenty-seven percent of those with one to five years of experience report being high-risk

compared to 34 percent for those with 26 to 30 years and 40 percent among educators with 30 or more years. Race is also a factor in risk. Over 14,860 respondents shared information about their race. Educators of color are more likely to be high-risk than educators who are White.

Educators' Risk Varies by Race



Anxiety about the virus is the primary reason educators said they are not returning or are uncertain about doing so. It was cited by 87 percent of high-risk educators and 77 percent of those who are not high-risk.

While concerns about the virus are paramount, several other issues are flagged by some groups including the impact of budget cuts and salary. Nearly 14 percent of paraprofessionals cite budget cuts as a consideration for leaving as do almost 19 percent of transportation staff. About seven percent of paraprofessionals and 12.5 percent of transportation employees say salary is a factor. More than 8 percent of new teachers say salary is an issue, and about seven percent also note budget cuts as a concern that could result in leaving.

Retirement is the reason about 41 percent of educators with more than 30 years of experience are leaving. Approximately 12 percent of educators with 26 to 30 years of experience report making the same decision.

Concern about spreading the virus to high-risk family members or childcare challenges were noted as reasons for not returning in educators' written responses.

Support for Online Instruction

Many districts are offering online instruction to families to address their concerns about the virus. If the virus spreads through schools and communities, districts may shift all students to remote instruction, offered primarily online. Educators' perception of their readiness to provide

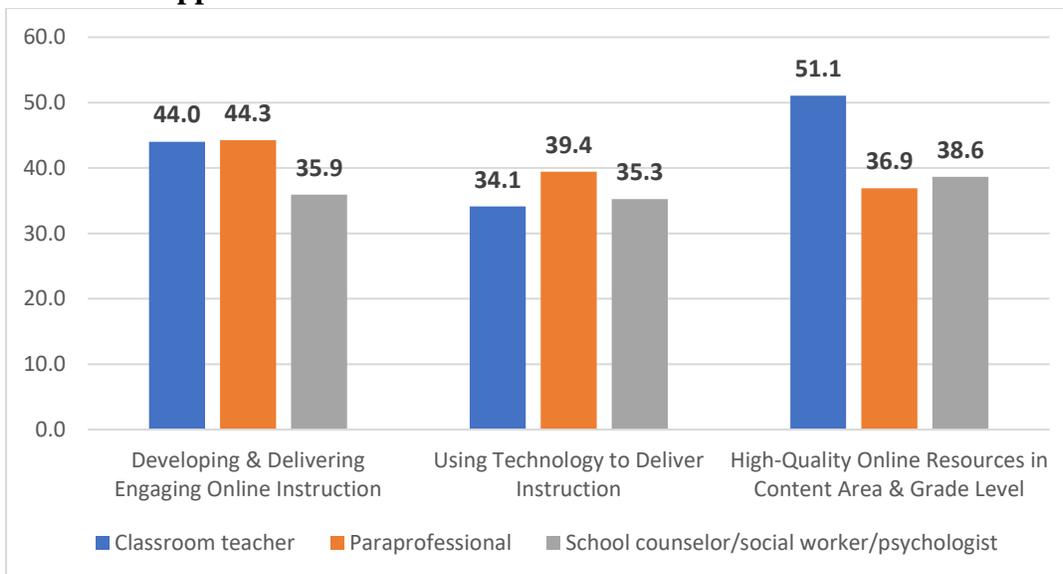
online instruction is uneven. While many feel prepared, sizable portions do not or are only partially ready.

Educators’ Readiness to Provide Online Instruction

	Yes	No	Somewhat
School-level administrator	59.6	8.3	32.1
Classroom teacher	43.8	14.4	41.9
Paraprofessional	37.8	17.8	44.4
School counselor/social worker/psychologist	47.7	12.0	40.3
School nurse	39.9	24.6	35.6

To be better prepared for the possibility of providing online instruction, many educators want high-quality online resources that align with their content area and grade level as well as professional learning in two areas: developing and delivering engaging online instruction and technology used to deliver online instruction.

Educator Supports Needed for Online Instruction



Providing these supports is particularly important for new teachers. More than half of teachers with one to five years of experience want professional learning in developing engaging online instruction and nearly 38 percent want training in the technologies used to deliver online instruction. In addition, 60 percent would like high-quality resources that align with their content area and grade level.

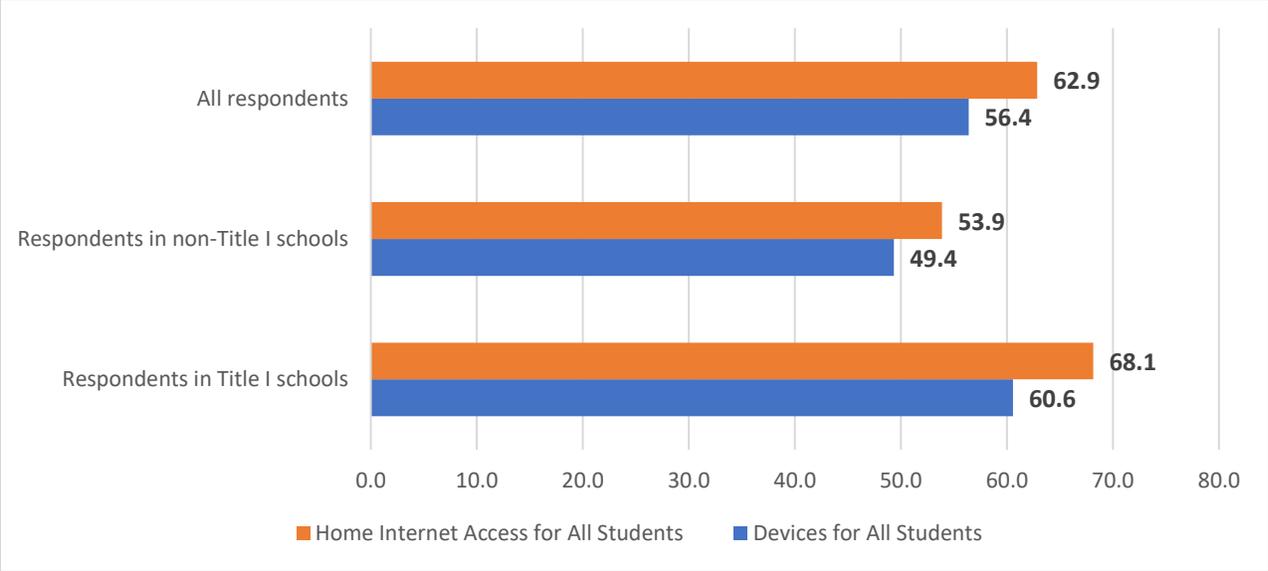
Ensuring educators have the tools to provide instruction from home if schools close is also critical. While most educators have a laptop to use for instruction at home, some do not.

Position	Need Laptop
School-level administrator	12.7
Classroom teacher	14.1
Paraprofessional	38.8
School counselor/social worker/psychologist	19.3
School nurse	27.8

Lack of internet connectivity is a challenge for about 11 percent of educators. In their written comments, some educators noted poor connectivity in their area, which impeded their ability to provide instruction.

Ensuring students have devices that can be used at home as well as home internet connectivity is a need identified by most educators. Those who work in Title I schools are more likely to flag both as a need than those who do not.

Students’ Device and Internet Connectivity Needs



Educators also highlighted the challenges of caring for and teaching their own children if schools close again. Thirty-seven percent of educators have a child who needs sustained supervision and/or assistance with schoolwork or has a child who needs childcare. If schools shift to online instruction due to spread of COVID-19 as they did in the spring, educators will need support balancing their professional responsibilities and those of their family.

In written comments, educators flagged multiple issues connected with online instruction:

- Unsuitability of online instruction for young children and those with special needs
- Need for clear expectations and accountability for student work and participation
- A plan for and support with engaging parents and holding them accountable
- A districtwide platform to use and training in using it

- Balancing teaching from home while caring for their own children
- Access to technology and technology-support: printers, camera, microphone and other devices; subscriptions to online resources; technology support for students and parents; reimbursement for cost of educators' data plans
- Supports for English Language Learners including translation and assistance with technology.
- Art supplies for students
- Time to plan for online instruction including time to collaborate with colleagues

Conclusion

Educator feedback acquired through the survey and their direct conversations with PAGE staff highlight the significant challenges to successfully resolving the desire to be in classrooms with students and the legitimate safety and health concerns for all in the school environment. Data shows the path forward includes delaying the start of school to allow time for the potential reduction of the spike in Georgia COVID-19 cases and opening schools with virtual only instruction in communities with substantial spread of COVID-19. Data also strongly supports further refinement of return-to-school safety plans with enhanced direct communication on these plans, following public health mask guidance, and the accommodation of high-risk staff through assignment in virtual and non-contact roles.

Though returning to Georgia's classrooms is an important step in adapting to the continued presence of COVID-19, doing so must be accomplished in measured ways that provide the safest possible environment to effectively protect our educators and student populations.