

SB 5037, a bill to allow public schools to safely open under internationally-recognized health guidelines

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Key Findings

1. One of the obstacles to safely reopening Washington's schools is the lack of a clear and transparent COVID metric.
2. SB 5037 proposes a COVID metric that is based on international health protocols and has been safely implemented by many countries and states in the nation.
3. Only 63,000 students, or five percent, of Washington's 1.1 million public school students are receiving in-person instruction.
4. Most of Washington's students are receiving only remote, virtual instruction, widely understood to be inferior to in-person instruction.
5. Washington's public school students are falling behind their peers in the rest of the country, and in other countries.
6. The harm of the COVID school shutdowns has fallen hardest on Washington's low-income, minority students.

Introduction

SB 5037 is a bipartisan bill sponsored by Senator John Braun (R-Centralia) and Senator Mark Mullet (D-Issaquah). It would create a new system of COVID-19 metrics which school officials would use to reopen public schools to in-person instruction using safety guidelines. The new system this bill proposes is based upon the public health recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO).¹ Twenty countries are using WHO health metrics to safely reopen their schools to children, including the countries of Denmark, Germany, Israel, Japan, Norway, and France.²

Data on opening public schools

Private schools are already open in Washington state and public schools are safely reopening across the country. This national School Tracking Map from the digital community service Burbio shows that schools in the majority of states have reopened to in-person or hybrid instruction for most of their students. Hybrid instruction is in-person instruction for part of the week, with remote instruction for the rest of the week. Less than one-third of states provide most students only remote, virtual instruction.³

- 1 "Five big questions about when and how to open schools amid COVID-19," By Bethany Brookshire, Aimee Cunningham, Erin Garcia de Jesus, Jonathan Lambert and Laura Sanders, Science News, August 4, 2020, at <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/covid-19-coronavirus-kids-schools-opening-when-how-risks>.
- 2 "Reopening US Schools in the Era of COVID-19: Practical Guidance From Other Nations," by Lala Tanmoy Das, MS1; Erika L. Abramson, MD, MSc2,3; Rainu Kaushal, MD, MPH2, JAMA Network, June 30, 2020, at <https://jamanetwork.com/channels/health-forum/fullarticle/2767982>.
- 3 "Burbio's K-12 School Opening Tracker," by Burbio, January 12, 2021, at <https://about.burbio.com/overview/>. According to its website: "Burbio.com is the industry leader in aggregating school, government, library and community event information for delivery over mobile, web, video, email and voice."

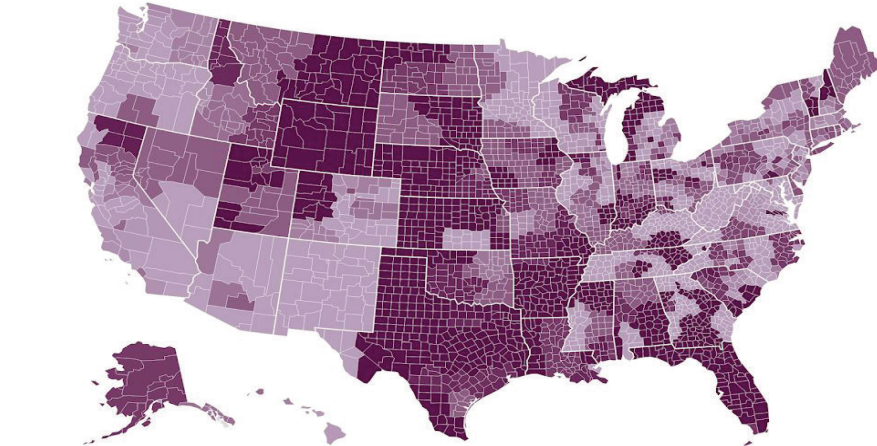
Burbio's K-12 School Opening Tracker

Map Indicates Virtual Versus In Person Learning For K-12 Public Schools Across the US

1-12-2021 School Learning Plans by County

IN-Person Index
(0=Virtual,100=Traditional)

0 100



Map: By Burbio - Created with Datawrapper

Burbio actively monitors 1,200 districts, including the 200 largest school districts in the US. District plans are reviewed every 72 hours to identify changes. School districts in the data set are a mix of sizes and distributed nationally in such a way to represent local decision-making across the country and averages are weighted to reflect student populations. For more details on methodology or detailed breakdown of county information email dennis@burbio.com.

The data shows that Washington state officials are denying most students access to in-person instruction in public schools (as noted, private schools are open).

According to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, only 63,000 students, or five percent, of Washington's 1.1 million public school students are receiving in-person instruction.⁴ The remaining 95 percent of Washington's students are receiving low-quality remote virtual instruction.

Many districts responded to rising COVID rates in November by ceasing in-person instruction temporarily. Because of this COVID surge, as of January 12, 2021, 55 percent of students in the United States receive only remote instruction online, with 30.8 % receiving "traditional" in-person school every day, and 14.9 percent attending hybrid schools. Burbio predicts that:

"We expect the percentage of students attending virtual only schools to drop over the course of the next six weeks as districts who did have students in the classroom in the Fall return after Covid-19 induced breaks, [. . .] But the myriad of regulatory and labor obstacles to in-person learning in places that have never gotten started, the significant level of hybrid instruction across the US, and the unpredictable course of Covid-19 means the balance of the 2021 academic year will continue to be highly disrupted for the vast majority of K-12 public school students." - January 11, 2021⁵

The experience of the pandemic has also repeatedly demonstrated that labor unions are playing a large role in keeping schools closed to in-person instruction. States like Washington, without right-to-work laws, are 14 percentage points less likely to open public schools to in-person instruction than those

4 "School Reopening Data as of 12/8/20," Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, at: <https://www.k12.wa.us/about-ospi/press-releases/novel-coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-resources/school-reopening-data>

5 "What's Trending, The Latest from Burbio," Burbio Blog, at <https://info.burbio.com/>.

in states with such laws.⁶ A comparison of the policy framework used by different states shows that in certain states powerful unions are keeping schools closed.

Learning loss could impose harm that lasts a lifetime

The school shutdowns are causing children “a hurt that could last a lifetime,” as described by a recent report from McKinsey and Co.⁷ School shutdowns have exacerbated existing achievement gaps between minority children and their peers.⁸ Hispanic, black and low-income students have lost 9.2, 10.3 and 12.4 months of learning, respectively, an educational disaster for these children.⁹ Many special needs children have regressed in their learning, and may never recover from districts withdrawing in-person instruction. Seattle Public Schools is now under investigation from the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Education for neglecting its special needs students, in violation of federal law.¹⁰

The COVID rules in Washington apply differently to private schools, homeschooling and private online instruction. Most private

schools in Washington state have safely opened to in-person instruction.

Conclusion

Washington state officials should consider removing the many regulatory and labor obstacles to reopening the schools. One of those obstacles is the lack of a clear and transparent COVID metric to help school districts safely reopen. That metric is provided by SB 5037. This metric is based on international health protocols and has been safely implemented by many countries and many states in the nation.

Since the beginning of the school shutdowns in March, two-thirds of the states in the country have provided most of their students with in-person or hybrid instruction. Less than one-third of states, which includes Washington state, have restricted most students to remote instruction only, which is widely considered to be inferior.

As a result, Washington’s public school students are falling behind their peers in the rest of the country, and in other countries. The harm of the COVID school shutdowns has fallen hardest on Washington’s low-income, minority students.

As COVID rates decline in the weeks and months ahead, other states will move to safely reopen their schools. The clear health guidance proposed by SB 5037 would allow children and families in Washington state to fully participate as public schools open and learning opportunities increase.

6 “It’s Union Power, Not Safety Issues, That’s Determining Which US Schools Reopen This Fall,” Corey DeAngelis and Christos Makridis, CATO Institute, September 2, 2020, at <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/its-union-power-not-safety-issues-thats-determining-which-us-schools-reopen>.

7 “COVID-19 and Student Learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime,” by McKinsey and Company, June 2020, at <https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/McKinsey/Industries/Public%20and%20Social%20Sector/Our%20Insights/COVID-19%20and%20student%20learning%20in%20the%20United%20States%20The%20hurt%20could%20last%20a%20lifetime/COVID-19-and-student-learning-in-the-United-States-FINAL.pdf>.

8 McKinsey and Co reports that before COVID the average black or Hispanic student was roughly two years behind the average white one, and low-income students were underrepresented among top performers, and that the COVID shutdown has caused Hispanic, black and low-income students to lose 9.2, 10.3 and 12.4 months of learning, respectively. The COVID shutdown represents a learning disaster for these children.

9 Ibid.

10 “‘It’s about time:’ Seattle mom reacts to federal investigation of Seattle Public Schools,” Hana Kim, Q13 Fox.com, at <https://www.q13fox.com/news/its-about-time-seattle-mom-reacts-to-federal-investigation-of-seattle-public-schools>.

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