

Item G: Presentations and conversation: “Lessons Learned – Navigating to the New Normal”
Statement from Erika Christakis

Thank you very much for this opportunity to speak with the school board about Vermont children’s educational needs. I am an early childhood educator and have worked as a preschool teacher and center director; educational consultant; college instructor; and substitute teacher in New England elementary schools. I write about children and schooling for the popular press and am the author of a 2016 book, *The Importance of Being Little: What Young Children Really Need From Grownups*. I serve on the national advisory board of Defending the Early Years, a non-profit organization committed to equitable and high-quality early education for all children. And I am also the mother of three adult children and a 4th grader. This is a recent article I wrote for the Atlantic on some of the challenges facing reopening schools:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/reopening-schools-easy-part/612046/>

Over the last three months, we’ve seen confirmation that relationships are a primary – if not *the* primary - fuel for learning. The scientific consensus on cognitive development is clear that young children’s and adolescents’ brains grow in the context of strong relationships, and I suspect most teachers and parents would agree that the heart of good teaching lies in the relationship between student and teacher. In some cases, this core relationship has been preserved through a combination of intense dedication, administrative and parental support, and technological creativity. In many cases, however, students and schools have struggled to engage all students, particularly very young children who vulnerable to harm from excess screen time and those with personal or home challenges that make distance learning difficult. As students return to the classroom in the Fall - with the prospect of new schedules, new routines, new expectations, and ongoing uncertainty about the very nature of schooling, I’d like to propose that school districts consider the following priorities:

- Knowledge of child development and a commitment to child-centered practice
- Prioritization of the youngest and most vulnerable children
- Flexibility for children, families, and teaching staff
- Shared sense of mission and duty

Current media discussions about the ‘new normal’ have centered on a generic desire to “get kids back to school.” Although understandable in a time of uncertainty, there may be a temptation to standardize responses and to treat the student body as a monolithic entity. I would urge districts to do the hard work of considering the varying needs of their community – families included. Schools will face a whole host of questions and decision points whose responses may look very different for a five-year-old versus a 17 year old; or for a child with serious learning disabilities compared to a more typically developing child; or for caregiver or teacher with a chronic health condition compared to one without pre-existing conditions.

Consider, for example, the concept of “social distancing,” (e.g. sitting or playing in isolation), which is largely incompatible with early education, given young children’s hardwired need to learn through hands-on exploration, boisterous play, peer friendships, and complex, highly interactive conversation. In my professional opinion, no child under third grade should be asked to wear a mask, and no Kindergarten or 1st grader should be taught by a teacher in a mask for an extended period of the day (because young children need to see teachers’ faces for optimal emotional and language development). On the other hand, high school students and some middle schoolers may do quite well

with a more limited in-person experience and greater opportunities for autonomy. They are likely better able to wear masks, too, when needed, and to grasp the implications for themselves and the community of other protective measures. Even so, the risk-taking associated with the teenage brain will pose different challenges compared to younger students, especially as it relates to the wellbeing of other members of the community.

The list goes on. Some children, particularly those with trauma histories or social-emotional problems, may struggle with anxiety during a pandemic. Others may struggle to manage what will surely be time-consuming, intrusive, and frustrating new hygiene practices. Decisions about classroom layout, lunchtime procedures, recess times, bus schedules, drop-off and pickup procedures, the role of extracurriculars and sports – to name a few concerns – will be important to consider in a developmental context. The ability to play on a team or in an orchestra is arguably more essential for a high school senior applying to college than it is for a first grader. If the goal is to reduce community exposure, all kinds of small decisions will need to be weighed in the context of tradeoffs across age groups and their unique needs, rather than made in isolation.

Families, too, make different risk assessments based on their own personal circumstances (and risk tolerance) and they may vary greatly in both their ability and willingness to keep children at home for some or all of the school day, especially should COVID-19 cases begin to climb. Those parents who do want to keep children at home should be granted some measure of flexibility, which may require adjustments to truancy policies and academic expectations. It will be important to stay focused on the shared mission of harm reduction through reducing school density and exposure.

Understanding the needs and desires of family members will go a long way toward cultivating a shared sense of purpose and collective action. Trust is essential during a pandemic and any policies that can be modified to reduce barriers between home and school – always a good goal – should be considered. This is especially important in an environment where it is unlikely any one constituency – teachers, administrators, parents, children - will get everything they are hoping for in the coming year.

Finally, children will return to school with atypical vulnerabilities and strengths. Some will have made gains in certain areas (such as independence or creativity) while falling “behind” in grade-level academic outcomes. A minority will likely have actually benefited from the time off to learn and play on their own schedule and away from traditional sources of school stress. (There is much we can learn from these students!). Still others will need comprehensive support to offset learning loss during the months of distance learning. We can expect that pre-existing inequities will be amplified as a result of remote learning, too. A child-centered perspective rooted in knowledge of child development is very helpful in keeping academic expectations focused on *children’s* needs rather than what adults believe needs to be “covered” by the end of the school year.

We should take the opportunity to learn big lessons from this unique moment in the nation’s history to assess how schools best serve, or fail to serve, our students. I am mindful of Mark Twain’s sage advice: “I never let my education get in the way of my learning” and hope, as children return to the ‘new normal,’ that we can protect human relationships, which are any school’s greatest asset and are undoubtedly the surest pathway to meaningful learning. Thank you.