

California bishops call for rapid, but safe, reopening of schools



Maria

Santiago works with her prekindergarten students at Good Heart of Mary Catholic School in San Juan in 2017.

On Wednesday, July 22, the bishops of California urged Governor Gavin Newsom to develop safe procedures to reopen schools for the 2020-21 school year. The governor announced July 17 that schools in the state would [begin the school year with distance learning](#) due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Below is their full statement:

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Catholic Church in California has supported and cooperated with public officials' efforts to contain the spread of this deadly disease, including closing our schools and suspending public worship. We took these steps, not because the government issued orders, but because our God is love and he calls us to love for our neighbors. That means working for the common good and protecting the sanctity and dignity of human life, taking special care for the poor and elderly, the sick and vulnerable.

In the wake of the coronavirus lockdowns, our schools made a remarkable transition to distance learning. Within days, all of our state's Catholic schools were up and running teaching students online.

On Friday, the 17th of July, Governor Gavin Newsom announced that all TK-12 schools in California will be held to new requirements for resuming in-person instruction. As a result, schools in 33 counties across the state of California will begin the new school year with only distance learning.

Catholic schools are not just a concern for Catholics and it is not accurate to describe our schools as “private.” Our schools serve an irreplaceable public good in giving young people the chance to realize the American dream, especially young people from racial minority and low-income families. Across California, our schools serve mostly racial minority students, and more than half of our schools are located in urban or inner-city neighborhoods. Many of the children we serve are not Catholics.

We understand that the threat of the coronavirus is real and ongoing in our state. And we understand the legitimate concerns that teachers, parents, and elected officials have about the safety of returning to the classrooms this fall. At the same time, we are deeply concerned about the broader health and development issues for our children if the state presumes to rely only on distance learning until a vaccine is developed.

In-person learning, especially at the lower grades, provides emotional and social skills and supports that are crucial to early childhood development and the overall wellbeing of children which simply cannot be replaced.

What our children will lose by “virtual” education — in terms of emotional development, skills and learning and achievement — will have a significant impact. In the name of protecting their health in the short-term, we may very likely be risking their long-term growth and potential.

Our Catholic schools across the state have been diligently implementing the Centers for Disease Control guidance for schools and the recommendations of local health authorities in preparing to return to the classrooms. As many businesses, organizations, and government offices around the country are doing, we are making accommodations to adapt to the new realities caused by this pandemic.

The public-health science suggests that elementary-age students can return with low risk of infection or transmission of the virus among students or between students and teachers. So, we are urging Governor Newsom to continue the dialogue on this crucial question of how to reopen our schools safely.

We urge the Governor to expedite issuing regulations that will enable local health authorities to grant waivers for pre-K, primary, and secondary schools to open for in-person instruction.

Fast action by the Governor will allow decisions to be made on a case-by-case basis at the local level, by those public officials, along with educators, who are in the best position to evaluate safety concerns in individual schools.

We stand ready to work with the Governor and our neighbors on this matter of vital concern to our great state and especially to its poor and minority peoples.