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## **Guest Opinion: David Damsker's remarks about 3-foot social distancing in schools are harmful**

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More than 15,000 members of the Pennsylvania State Education Association in Bucks and Montgomery counties are collectively working to ensure that our 203,000 public school students receive a top-notch education.

We take issue with the current recommendation of the Bucks County Department of Health stating that a safe reopening of our schools can occur with a distance of only three feet between individuals in school buildings.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Red Cross, and the Pennsylvania Department of Health have urged all citizens to maintain social distancing of at least six feet between individuals who are not members of the same household.

These habits have now become a part of our daily routine and for good reason: they help stem the spread of a disease that has killed more than 7,000 Pennsylvanians.

It was surprising, then, to see Dr. David Damsker, Director of the Bucks County Department of Health, issue guidance to school administrators that defies national and state officials and public health experts across the spectrum. He has said that a distance of only three feet is sufficient between individuals in school buildings. The county has continued to issue guidance that further erodes precautions for adults in our school buildings as well, including parents, faculty, and staff.

On July 16, the Department of Education issued updated guidance — calling for distancing student desks/seating and other social distancing practices that allows at least six feet of separation among students and staff throughout the day to the maximum extent feasible.

PSEA members have led students through fire drills, practiced weather emergency drills, and have navigated the terrible necessity of active shooter drills. This pandemic is not a drill — we are in the middle of the storm.

Over 15,000 citizens in Bucks and Montgomery counties have been diagnosed with the virus. The Bucks County Department of Health and Bucks County Schools must maintain the same social distancing safeguards for our students and staff as every other county in Pennsylvania.

With our understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on children is evolving, weakening widely accepted precautions and guidelines will only cause greater confusion. We know it will be a challenge asking our youngest learners to wear a mask in school. A distance of six feet would be a helpful precaution to ensure the safety of all our students.

It's counterproductive to our region's efforts to slow the spread of this virus to have social distancing in our Bucks County schools set at three feet and those in neighboring Montgomery County set at six feet. The halved distancing guidelines are unfair and dangerous to our most vulnerable populations — both students and adults alike.

The impact of COVID-19 on our educators and support professionals in high-risk categories, and those who live in their households, is indisputable. This virus causes harm and already has been deadly to numerous public school employees across the county.

Please don't praise our work as heroes one day and allow us to be expendable the next. We want to be back in our classrooms, offices, cafeterias, buses, and libraries with our students. However, we can't rise to the challenges of this pandemic when our local officials are undercutting the national and state guidelines for a safe return.

The Bucks County Department of Health should revise their school reopening guidelines to align with those made by the CDC and allow our students and staff at least the same level of basic prevention and protection as our colleagues across the state and country.

Now is not the time to fall short on protecting our students and staff. I urge educators, parents, and community members to contact Dr. Damsker's office and ask him to revise his guidance to support the health of all individuals in our public schools.

*Bill Senavaitis is PSEA Mideastern Region President.*