

MEDICAL SOCIETY OF THE COUNTY OF ERIE

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April 22, 2021

Dr. Gale Burstein's proactive approach to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Erie County should be praised, not dismissed. The calls for Dr. Gale Burstein's resignation by the WNY Students First parent group as Erie County Health Commissioner are truly unfortunate. Dr. Burstein has consistently and accurately guided the most prudent course at a time when lives are at stake and when there have been so many unknowns surrounding the transmission of this unprecedented airborne illness.

To address one of the concerning claims asserted by WNY Students First:

- “ECDOH is not following science...The ECDOH has not followed NYSDOH guidance and has continually overreached on schools”

Dr. Burstein leans on NYSDOH and CDC published data relating to in-school transmission, which breaks down COVID-19 school transmission rates by region (including Western New York). Additionally, Erie County physicians diagnose COVID-19 among children in their practices every day, with numbers escalating over the past few weeks. Some children are not ill. However, some children develop quite severe disease; some require hospital admission; and some need substantial medical support in the pediatric intensive care unit. According to Erie County Department of Health surveillance data, over the last month, COVID-19 cases among the 0-9 age group have increased significantly, with 122 confirmed cases during the week ending March 27, 2021 doubling to 258 confirmed cases in the week ending April 17, 2021. The 10-19 age group trend is similar, with the number of COVID-19 cases growing from 328 to 566 over that same timeframe.

Notably, and perhaps because of the increase in vaccine distribution, the same two groups – ages 0-9 and 10-19 – are the only groups whose COVID-19 figures have increased in Erie County over the last 7 days. In all other age groups, Erie County saw a decline. As a vaccine is not yet available for children under the age of 16, this trend must be addressed by other measures. Over the last few months, at least three COVID-19 variants have been identified in Erie County - B.1.1.7 or the UK variant, B.1.427 or the California variant, and B.1.351 or the South African variant. Unlike the original strain of COVID-19, these variants appear to be easier for children to contract.¹ Protecting our children by maintaining the 6-foot social distancing rule, requiring masks, and pausing youth sport teams if an athlete or coach tests COVID-19 positive will help drive down those increasing confirmed COVID-19 cases in our school-age population while also protecting the vulnerable population at home who may be exposed to an asymptomatic child or a child showing only mild

¹ <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/what-to-know-about-covid-19-variants-and-children#Are-kids-passing-it-more?>

symptoms. These are all recommendations issued by Dr. Burstein in reliance on evolving CDC and NYSDOH guidelines.

The physicians of the Erie County Medical Society believe that the parent and student groups advocating for Dr. Burstein's resignation are simply off the mark. Contrary to their perception, Dr. Burstein has demonstrably leaned on prevailing scientific evidence, including the CDC's evolving guidelines, to craft her recommendations for the region.

Take, for example, the 3-foot social distancing rule. The CDC recently opined that it was safe to reduce the physical distance between elementary school students in the classroom from 6 feet to 3 feet. However, for middle and high school students, in instances where transmission rates are high (such as is currently the case in Erie County), and where cohorting is not possible, the 6-foot physical distancing recommendation persists.

According to the CDC, the 3-foot rule is limited to students in classrooms with universal mask wearing. In all other circumstances (interactions between adults and between adults and students, in common areas such as lobbies and auditoriums, when eating, when engaged in activities such as singing, sports, or other exercise that cannot be done outdoors or in a large well-ventilated auditorium, and in community settings), the CDC actually recommends 6-foot physical distancing.

Furthermore, the notion that this Students First group calls into question Dr. Burstein's transparency with respect to the COVID-19 data is also purely false. ECDOH publishes their surveillance data on their website with refreshed updates on a daily basis and Dr. Burstein leads weekly televised press conferences where she addresses the COVID-19 transmission rate as it evolves.

Dr. Burstein has demonstrated that she wants the same thing as Erie County physicians and the community – a safe way to ensure our children receive the education they need and deserve. Unfortunately, there is no risk-free solution. In the COVID-19 world we now inhabit, we need to listen to our Health Commissioner with a keen ear, not dismiss her. COVID-19 fatigue is real, and we are all feeling it, but when infection rates among our children's age groups are on the rise,² heeding the cautious recommendations of our Health Commissioner is something we ought to be encouraging, not abandoning.

Sincerely,

Stanley Pietrak, MD
President of the Medical Society of Erie County

² COVID-19 cases among the 0-9 age group have increased significantly, with 122 confirmed cases the week ending March 27, 2021 rising to 258 confirmed cases in the week ending April 17, 2021; among the 10-19 age group, the number grew from 328 to 566 over that same timeframe (Erie County Department of Health, Office of Epidemiology data).