

## Why we closed schools

by Dr. Gladys I. Cruz

The spread of the [novel coronavirus](#) (COVID-19) has forced schools and businesses across the country and globe to close – causing an economic and societal disruption like we've never seen (and hopefully will never see again) in our lifetimes.

For education leaders, closing our schools was a painful choice (as it impacted and disrupted families, learning, the distribution of meals, delivery of special education services, etc.), but it was necessary to slow the spread of this illness and save lives.

In retrospect, closing schools was the easiest hard decision we could make as a BOCES region and state. The harder decision will be when to reopen our schools. This is something we will need to take one day at a time for the foreseeable future.

In the meantime, we all need to understand our individual and collective responsibility to combat this unprecedented public health crisis. This means staying home, avoiding large gatherings and practicing social distancing. This will be hard. After all, humans are social and used to coming together, especially during times of stress and hardship.

Ultimately, how well we follow health and government officials' recommendations to stop the spread of the virus - [wash our hands, clean high-touch and high-traffic areas, and practice social distancing](#) will [flatten the epidemic curve](#) in ways that could save many lives, including those of our family and friends.

Governor Cuomo has ordered all schools closed for at least two weeks – until April 1st. [School districts in our BOCES region decided to cancel all classes \(prior to his executive order\) to minimize the potential exposure to COVID-19 beginning on March 18.](#) Following the Governor's Executive Order to close all schools, the New York State Education Department has canceled the grade 3-8 state assessments. If the closure extends, the state will need to make decisions about the June Regents, graduation and grade advancement. We need to prepare for the possibility, if not the inevitability, that schools may not reopen to students this school year. As painful as it sounds for educators, we need to keep our schools closed following the Governor's Executive Orders in order to stop the spread of the virus.

We need to realize the importance of creating safe distances and avoiding the types of infectious transmissions that our school closures are trying to prevent. While schools are closed, it is important that sleepovers, playdates and parties be cancelled – new alternatives to connecting children with their friends and family members using virtual tools must be implemented. Also visiting playgrounds and other public structures, which may not be regularly cleaned, especially during the COVID-19 crisis.

Some are not heeding the advice of elected and health officials during this pandemic – and continuing as if this is a snow day or spring break. You may have seen the pictures and videos of people at the beach in Florida or gathering in parks in New York City. [This needs to stop.](#) Social distancing can help stop the spread of the virus and ensure that our health facilities are not overwhelmed.

While it is recommended that you avoid public spaces and gatherings, this does not mean locking yourself in the house. It is important, especially during times of stress, to keep active, both physically and mentally. However, try to maintain at least six feet between you and others.

While there are some businesses that remain open during this crisis, try to limit your trips. While pharmacy and grocery stores remain open it is important to wash your hands before and after visiting these businesses and to maintain a safe distance while shopping. Remember the importance of not hoarding – having too much of something only serves to hinder others.

Inevitably, this illness will spread. In fact, the Governor indicated that [40-80 percent of New Yorkers could end up getting COVID-19](#). However, you can do your part in bringing this statistic down. Together we can mitigate the spread. As with any illness, if you are sick, isolate yourself from others as much as possible, especially the elderly and those with compromised immune systems or other underlying health issues (asthma, diabetes, pregnancy, cancer, etc.). Contact your primary care physician if you think you may be sick with COVID-19 or any other illness at this time. Consider not walking into a doctor's office without talking to them first. Some insurance plans, such as BlueShield of Northeastern New York, offer 24/7 telemedicine option – please see your local plan for more information and use this option if it is available to you.

Looking ahead, I encourage everyone to remain calm. Our ancestors survived previous pandemics and widespread diseases – including the bubonic plague that killed 75-200 million in the 14th century and influenza that killed 20-50 million from 1918 to 1920.

It is natural to feel stress, anxiety, a loss of control or lament for our lives pre-COVID-19. As the Governor said in a recent press conference, let's focus on what we can control – expanded time with family and an opportunity to use the precious commodity of time. Think of your role in limiting the spread and your opportunity to use this time positively.

I am so proud of my staff and the region's efforts to prepare for the continuity of education, meal distribution and general operations of the region's school systems. There are many unknowns and what-ifs when it comes to the weeks and months ahead, but we will address them the best way we can, together as a region.

Questar III's mission is "changing lives, realizing dreams and doing together what can't be done alone." This mission has never been more important – in fact, today it is saving lives, preserving dreams and working together to have the greatest impact in our region.

Thank you for your support of the BOCES and your continuing efforts, both professionally to support others, and personally to practice restraint and reduced contact to stop the spread of this illness.