

Rep. Vruwink: Praying for a safe and successful school year

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The start of a new school year typically brings anxiety and excitement for both teachers and students. This year, anxiety and not excitement will likely prevail for most students and teachers.

Schools were shut down last spring to slow the spread of the virus, but we now have more Covid diagnoses than we did at its worst in April.

One of the many challenges of re-opening classrooms in Wisconsin is that there isn't much good data about what could happen if we do open. Will in-person learning lead to a jump in transmission of Covid-19? Will students and teachers get sick? If they do, will we quarantine everyone who they were in contact with.

Other countries have begun reopening their schools. We can adopt some of their best practices and learn from their missteps before their missteps become our own. Here is what experts have to say about it:

Countries that have tried to re-open their schools while also lifting restrictions on bars, restaurants, and large gatherings failed miserably. Students and staff experienced a surge in Covid-19 cases. The lesson for Wisconsin schools is to take it slowly and deliberately and be able to track what is happening as they re-open.

A second lesson is to be creative about seeking out social distance. Schools should aim for six feet distance between desks but some countries were successful with four feet. Some schools held classes outside whenever possible but in our Wisconsin climate, this could only happen for a limited time.

The hybrid model of keeping kids home on certain days of the week worked well in many countries and is being considered by school districts in Wisconsin.

A third lesson is to look at countries that successfully re-opened last spring by bringing back elementary students first, then gradually welcoming older students. This is not to say that Wisconsin schools should open first just for elementary students, but districts might want to consider the many ways in which age influences risk.

Finally, across Europe and Asia, successful school re-openings have happened only when the spread of the coronavirus was relatively under control. School districts across Wisconsin will have to watch the number of cases within their community and be flexible to open and close while cases could spike or decline.

Schools can have the best-laid plans but they will only work if they have buy-in from everyone involved. We could see a lot of veteran teachers take early retirement if we try to start school in the fall. Teachers with spouses working might decide to sit the school year out. Younger teachers who are just starting might feel overwhelmed and decide it's not worth it. This could leave many districts scrambling for teachers at the last minute.

As for me, the fear of the unknown has made me decide after 44 years in the classroom, I will not be returning as a substitute teacher this fall. Even though I subbed only 20 to 30 days a school year, it was another chance to be with students and remind me of all the wonderful students I taught over 44 years. I pray for everyone to have a safe and successful school year.