

# Gov. Murphy left N.J. schools in limbo. Was it the right decision?

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An empty classroom in Bartle School in the Highland Park school district. Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media

Gov. [Phil Murphy](#) won't order New Jersey schools to remain closed for the rest of the academic year.

Not yet, at least.

On Thursday, Murphy extended the statewide school closure through [at](#)

[least May 15](#), rather than shutting down schools through June as more than a dozen other states have done in response to the [coronavirus](#) pandemic.

The decision was met with mixed reactions from school leaders, who said the governor is offering the optimism some educators want, but not the certainty all superintendents will soon need.

"I respect the governor's slow, gradual process with this," said Scott Taylor, superintendent of the Highland Park School District. "But I think there are plenty of superintendents who would like to know sooner rather than later if we are closed for the rest of the school year."

Murphy's suggestion that schools could reopen as soon as May 18 appears to contradict his comments from Tuesday, when he said the state wouldn't begin to return to normal [until June or July](#). But the governor said Thursday that he wants at least one more opportunity to reassess the situation before making a final decision.

"I would be the happiest guy in New Jersey, maybe America, if not the planet, to be able to have a different message then," Murphy said in [his daily coronavirus briefing](#), noting he's heard concerns from many parents of high school seniors. But the governor also stressed the decision to reopen schools must be grounded in fact, not emotion.

New Jersey has [at least 75,317 cases](#) and 3,518 deaths from COVID-19, state officials announced Thursday. Only New York has more cases and deaths among U.S. states.

Health experts insist New Jersey needs to see a prolonged decline in infections, hospitalizations and fatalities before schools and other crowded buildings can reopen.

Arthur DiBenedetto, superintendent of Hopatcong Borough Schools in Sussex County, applauded the governor for giving schools "a glimmer of

hope.”

Even a few weeks of classroom instruction could be critical for the 1,500-student district, he said. More than a quarter of its students have special needs and are in danger of falling behind with remote instruction, he said. So are those who are English language learners, or at-risk students who require counseling.

The closure is especially affecting high school seniors, who are [missing out on key rites of passage](#) as the outbreak sweeps the state, DiBenedetto said.

“I’m feeling very badly for my senior kids,” he said. “Their senior year has been stolen from them.”

In Highland Park, many teachers are eager to get back to school, Taylor said. There’s also a benefit to bringing students together before the summer to provide a sense of closure, he added.

However, Taylor questioned how much students will benefit academically from a return this school year. They would have to transition back to the classroom, only for school to wind down.

“There is not going to be a whole lot of learning happening between mid-May and June,” Taylor said.

Murphy initially [ordered all schools in the Garden State](#) — public and private, including pre-K and college — to close March 18 for at least two weeks. He later [extended that closure to April 17](#), saying he would not reopen schools until medical experts tell him it’s safe.

Taylor hopes the governor makes his next decision much sooner than May 15 because schools need to plan for the end of the school year, including graduation. They also have to decide if summer courses for students who need extra support will be online or in school.

"I think there is a little bit of confusion sewn as a result of not coming up with a more definitive deadline for closure," Taylor said. "There are district operations that need to be addressed and are still left in limbo."

Despite Murphy's optimistic tone, it still seems unlikely schools will reopen, said Richard Bozza, the executive director of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators.

"I think he's trying to hold out, but most of us think it's inevitable that the school year, in terms of getting back into buildings, is just over," Bozza said.

Bozza noted that Pennsylvania and New York City have already said their schools will not reopen.

"I'm not sure why he wouldn't be willing to do so," Bozza said of Murphy. "He has his reasons, whatever they may be."

Christopher Cerf, a former state education commissioner, has said a few weeks of classroom instruction aren't worth the risk of the pandemic regaining force in New Jersey.

"While the state is making great progress, there remains a great deal of uncertainty as to whether it will be safe and appropriate to reopen," Cerf, who served under former Gov. Chris Christie, said Thursday.

For classes to resume, schools will need sophisticated plans in place, Cerf said. They'll have to be able to test students and staff to ensure they aren't sick and to identify vulnerable populations for whom remote instruction continues to be required, he said.

"It's not like hitting a toggle switch in which you say yesterday there was no school, today there is school," Cerf said. "There is a great deal of planning that needs to be done in advance."

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