

# JEFFERSON COUNTY COMMISSION

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JAMES A. (JIMMIE) STEPHENS, PRESIDENT  
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## District 3

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Dr. Mark E. Wilson  
Jefferson County Department of Health  
1400 Sixth Avenue South  
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July 30, 2020

Dr. Wilson,

Your letter dated July 27<sup>th</sup> to Jefferson County school systems providing guidance and expression of concern over the reopening of schools in Jefferson County has created much discussion and consternation among parents and school officials. In my role as a member of the Jefferson County Commission and a Board Member of the Jefferson County Department of Health, I have been contacted by hundreds of constituents expressing their confusion and frustration over the mixed messages they are receiving concerning school attendance. Local school administrators, as well as the State Health Officer, Governor Ivey and others, have communicated their plans and expectations to safely reopen schools for in-class instruction in the coming weeks. Your letter, which has been widely publicized, seemingly contradicts this by "strongly recommending" that all Jefferson County school system's middle and high schools consider virtual instruction only.

I truly understand your concern and how your recommendation is consistent with the mission of your office. I can appreciate your thought process and reasoning. I sincerely believe you are doing your best to abate the spread of the virus. I also share the concerns of many of my constituents that there are several other important factors involved with reopening schools, all equally deserving strong consideration.

As a retired educator of 21 years, I can speak directly to the innate benefits for students of in-class instruction. Remote learning cannot compare with in-class instruction to provide focused learning resources, collaborative learning experiences, comprehension assessment, stable environment, social interaction, comprehensive meal program, improved organizational skills, critical thinking skills and personality and career skills. All are important. Teachers also monitor and are a primary source in reporting child abuse.

Equally important are our special needs students. Without in-class learning, individualized education plans (IEPs) simply cannot be executed. Student IEPs require individualized instructions in order to best afford students the opportunity to succeed. School systems utilize the least restrictive environment policy for their special needs students. It requires more student-teacher interaction in classroom settings to ensure success. We cannot expect these students to succeed without teacher interaction. Remote learning for these students undermines their due process if not given the opportunity for live classroom interaction.

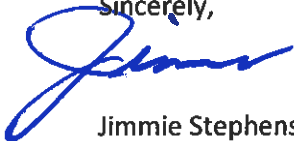
I would ask that you offer equal guidance and support to assist our school boards and superintendents relating to virtual, blended and traditional learning settings. These boards best know their communities and the individual needs of their students. Each family unit within each community must decide on their child's learning setting and each must be afforded options from which to choose. Guidelines for a safe environment for virtual, blended and traditional learning settings would offer each school board options from which to choose.

I strongly encourage you to provide sound, effective options for school boards to consider as they work diligently to structure a safe environment while maintaining the highest educational standards.

Governor Ivey has established that schools should do everything that they can so our students can return to a traditional learning environment. I agree with her. We should find ways to better coordinate messaging that provides the public with clarity and clear guidance, not add to the confusion. We must provide the public with safe, effective public health protocols and guidance for combating this pandemic while understanding and balancing the public right to individual choice.

I do not envy the difficult position you are in and the choices you must weigh. Thank you for considering my letter and the needs of students with learning challenges.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jimmie Stephens", is written over the typed name.

Jimmie Stephens