

## BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



### When Reopening Schools, Brain Health And Development Make A Difference

Our schools play such an important role in our Suncoast communities. As expressed in a [recent presentation](#) from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, without schools and related activities and routine, many “children cannot effectively develop, learn, grow, engage, socialize, be active, eat healthy food, or get support.”

Many parents and caregivers cannot go back to work until children go back to school. Knowing that schools will reopen at some point, researchers at Harvard Chan School set out to answer this question: What strategies should schools consider to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission? The research concluded that there is no perfect plan to reopen schools safely, only “less bad” options.

Schools provide safe, supportive learning environments for students. They employ teachers and other staff, and they also provide the critical services that help meet the physical, social, mental, and emotional needs of developing children and their families, especially those who are disadvantaged. But the continuing spread of COVID-19 has created a big divide between those who think the schools should reopen and those who think distance learning should continue.

Unfortunately, there is no historical precedent to inform the correct answer to this question of when our schools should reopen and how. The decision makers are faced with balancing the physical health risk of developing or spreading the virus with the neurodevelopmental and brain health risks of our children falling behind academically and being deprived of those essential social and emotional interactions that come from in-person learning.

A recent article from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) says not reopening schools “disrupts the delivery of in-person instruction and critical services to children and families, which has negative individual and societal ramifications.” The article goes on to say that reopening our schools allows us to invest in the education, well-being, and future of our children, but emphasizes that “every precaution” must be taken to protect the students, teachers and staff.

The [Brookings Institution](#) tends to agree, saying that even the youngest children have lost ground

academically and in social readiness because of COVID-19. Science has shown that social interaction plays a critical role in childhood development, including physical, social, emotional, academic and brain development. Those relationships with friends and teachers are essential for optimal achievement and outcomes. But Brookings is also in agreement that precautions must be taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The report from Brain Health Initiative colleagues at the [Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health](#) recognizes the challenges associated with reopening schools, but says scientific evidence indicates that strict adherence to control measures can reduce the physical risks to students and staff. The report suggests schools adopt and adapt the recommendations of healthy classrooms, buildings, activities, schedules and policies based on available resources and that each school revisit its approach as the COVID-19 situation changes over time.

The one thing that is clear in this debate is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Perhaps the biggest factor to take into consideration is what is happening in our community. The number of cases of COVID-19 continues to rise in both Manatee and Sarasota counties and the ages of those testing positive continues to trend younger. A balance is required between the needs of the students, including the value of social interaction, and the costs—both financial and social—of reducing the health risks for all, including students, teachers, staff and those everyone goes home to at the end of the day.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Help decrease the spread. Wear your mask in public, practice social distancing consistently and encourage everyone you love and know to do the same. If you feel sick, stay home. Remember that the incubation period for the virus is currently thought to be up to 14 days. Be well informed, with information from reliable sources about the multitude of factors that must be considered related to how and when to return to school. On the Suncoast, the choice is yours when it comes to deciding when your child will return to full-time, in-person instruction or attend classes remotely.

### **Manatee County Schools:**

Manatee County Schools have delayed the opening of schools by one week until Aug. 17. The school board approved reopening with: a five-day, on-campus instructional plan for parents who want their students to return to school full-time; a hybrid schedule where students mix on-campus learning with eLearning Manatee; and an option for parents who want their students to continue full-time eLearning.

### **Sarasota County Schools:**

Sarasota County Schools delayed the start of school to August 31 with the options: traditional, five-day, face-to-face instruction; return to assigned school attending classes remotely from home; and virtual school in which students work independently from home.

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI works collaboratively with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, and the Academy for Brain Health and Performance to build brain healthy communities through education, research, innovation and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention, and performance optimization*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the brain health movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.***

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