TO: Washoe County School Board and Superintendent McNeill

FROM: Trudy Larson, MD
Professor and Dean, School of Community Health Sciences

I have had the privilege of being a member of the Governor’s Medical Advisory Team for COVID since March. As a pediatrician initially and then as an infectious disease physician, I feel my expertise has been important to the decisions and advice our team has given to the governor. As an emerging disease, COVID-19 has made it essential to be able to pivot and respond in a rapid fashion. All of us are concerned with the surge of cases in Washoe County. I concurred with Kevin Dick when we spoke last week that the surge makes it difficult to support fully reopening the schools. Ten days prior, our MAT had an intense and deliberate conversation with Dr. McNeill and representatives from the Nevada Department of Education that laid out recommendations for how to handle in person classes and bus transportation. We used scientific and physiological evidence in discussing and voting on those recommendations. The numbers have surged since that conversation. After my discussion with Mr. Dick, I went back to the literature and noted a number of new articles and commentaries from important national groups. From that re-review of the literature, I revised my thinking and now recommend that K-5 grades should re-open in person while middle school and high school remain distanced learning.

Two pieces of evidence support my opinion:

1. Children less than 10 years of age have many fewer ACE-2 genes in their nasal epithelium. ACE-2 proteins are the receptor for COVID particles.
2. Children have been shown in studies to have less serious disease that is not readily transmitted to others. Unlike influenza, children are not the primary transmitters, adults are.

Our current surge numbers represent adult cases primarily. Given the science of COVID in children, my opinion is that the risk to children is far lower than the risk of delaying school. So many benefits accrue to children participating in all of the experiences of school. I think the recommendations of the MAT for how to safely bring students and teachers back is thorough and fully incorporated in the Washoe plan. It is my opinion that the benefit to children being in school is greater than the risk and that the plan proposed for schools is as safe as available evidence can make it. Having a choice for parents is important.