

Talking points for allowing teachers to work remotely:

Many school districts in the region have already agreed to allow educators the option to work from home (some with very few restrictions): Santa Barbara, Goleta, Buellton, Orcutt, Lucia Mar, Atascadero, and more. There are many other districts statewide who are giving employees the choice. Why is Santa Maria Joint Union High School District/Santa Maria-Bonita determined to put its employees at greater risk?

Santa Barbara County, and Santa Maria specifically, is a high transmission area. The Santa Barbara County “Industry Specific COVID-19 Prevention Plan Template” says (Section 10.8) “Provide students, teachers and staff from higher transmission areas opportunities for telework, virtual learning, independent study and other options as feasible to reduce travel to schools in lower transmission areas and vice versa.” Many staff live in San Luis County and other lower transmission areas, so bringing them to Santa Maria School sites not only increases the risk for them, it increases the likelihood of transmission into their communities.

The California Department of Public Health and CalOSHA similarly favors telework. In its “COVID-19 Industry Guidance: Schools and School-based Programs” (Section 4), it states that employers should “Support staff who are at higher risk for severe illness or who cannot safely distance from household contacts at higher risk, by providing options such as telework, where appropriate, or teaching in a virtual learning or independent study context.”

That section also guides employers to “Conduct all staff meetings, professional development training and education, and other activities involving staff with physical distancing measures in place, or virtually, where physical distancing is a challenge.” Any school with more than 120 certificated staff members will find physical distancing challenging, especially if the district implements the appropriate procedures to take each employee’s temperature and ask screening questions.

Given the choice, many employees will choose to work from their school site – and those employees will be safer if at least some other employees choose to work from home.

This is not a time or place to cut corners on safety – employees know that their lives are in the balance. Distance instruction can be accomplished as well from the safer isolation of an employee’s home as it can from the school site. Concern over the risk of reporting in person may drive some employees to use leave, disrupting students’ education. And where will the District find adequate substitutes to risk their health for low substitute pay?