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Coronavirus today: Schools will open as currently scheduled

BY **Max Brantley** ON July 21, 2020 2:04 pm

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Governor Hutchinson addressed mounting concerns about school reopening at his daily coronavirus briefing and said there'd be no change in the Aug. 24 start date.

"We remain committed to that," he said. He said teachers had raised "important questions that we still have to answer." But he said "everybody is together" on going back to school and going back to school safely. It is not true, however, that "everybody" believes it can be done safely — including the **Arkansas chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics**.



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Hutchinson didn't address the Arkansas pediatricians, choosing instead to play taped TV interviews with five doctors who were sending their children back to school. He didn't say if any of them lived in Arkansas. **Health Director Jose Romero** said they were experts from elsewhere in the country, such as from Stanford and Vanderbilt. "Their opinions are well-respected."

Hutchinson said the state was committed to addressing "legitimate" questions about school opening.

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Secretary Johnny Key attended the briefing and touted in mostly general terms reopening plans from various school districts, including Jacksonville-North Pulaski, Quitman, Mountain Home, Stuttgart and Springdale, the largest in the state. Quitman is having staggered starting dates, for example. Springdale included students and representatives of minority groups on their planning committee, Key said.

When the session was opened for questions, a reporter asked about the Arkansas pediatricians' new statement, which recommended among others universal masking and county-by-county approaches to reopening. Hutchinson said he hadn't read it, but would

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He asked the new Health director, Dr. Romero, to comment. He's a member of the academy. He said, too, he'd just learned about the statement. But he commented: "Remember this is a moving target. COVID does what it wants. Any recommendations made today may not hold true in a month, or two months. We need to be flexible."

A reporter also asked about the **Little Rock Education Association** recommendation for a phased-in approach to reopening school, beginning only with virtual instruction. Not going to happen, Hutchinson indicated "It is important that as we open schools that Little Rock School District is not excluded from that opening. Classroom instruction is very important to that."

Key, who runs the Little Rock School District under state takeover, agreed with the governor.

Hutchinson emphasized there's a month remaining before school opening and things could change.

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The daily coronavirus count

Arkansas added 728 new cases of COVID-19 (122 in prisons) in the last 24 hours, for a total so far of 34,655. Deaths rose by 11 to 374. Net hospitalizations considering admissions and discharges rose by 17 to 488. 110 are on ventilators. Active cases: 6,998, almost 6,000 in the community.

The top counties for new cases: Pulaski, 110; Washington, 62; Crawford, 46; Benton, 45; Sebastian, 30; Jefferson, 29, and Saline, 24.

Tests completed in the last 24 hours: 5,670.

Other topics

The governor was asked if a business that refused to comply with the new **mask mandate** would exempt them from protection under his earlier **civil lawsuit immunity order** for businesses that aren't otherwise willfully ignoring health mandates. That would be a "question of fact" that would have to be answered for a jury or judge in determining good faith compliance.

Help us report on the coronavirus crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic is reshaping all aspects of life in Arkansas. We're interested in hearing from doctors, nurses and other health care workers; from patients and their families; from people in longterm care facilities and their families; from parents and students affected by the crisis; from people who have lost their job; from people with knowledge of workplaces or communities that aren't taking appropriate measures to slow the spread of the disease; and more.

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