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RETURN TO SCHOOL IS NOT A RETURN TO NORMAL

Back to school has always been a time filled with excitement and anxiety for both kids and parents but this year's unprecedented return to the classroom may be one of the most uncertain back to school seasons in history.

Worries about the Delta variant and confusion over mask mandates and safety regulations have families approaching the return to school with trepidation.

Unsurprisingly families are looking for ways to ease that worry.

According to many experts, the best thing families can do is to let go of the idea of trying to get back to normal this year.

As Kanecia Zimmerman, a professor of pediatrics at Duke University puts it, "We can do this, and we can do this safely." But these solutions will require a level of coordination, political will, and acceptance of the reality of the situation that, during the many months of this pandemic, haven't always been in evidence."

This acceptance of "not normal" is showing up everywhere in back to school prep. Almost every list of the top 20 must haves for back to school includes colorful designer masks and playful sanitizer holders designed to help kids embrace the necessary safety precautions many schools are taking this year.



Retailers have significantly changed their back to school plans as well, stocking less variety of back to school items and avoiding items tied to big movies that may or may not get released this fall.

"Retailers didn't buy a broad assortment, planning instead to have a lot of inventory of fewer choices — a risk mitigation strategy they had to put in place when they bought back to school six to nine months ago," said Nikki Baird, vice president of retail innovation at Aptos, a technology solutions provider that works with footwear brands and other retailers.

At the high school level many students are advocating for more mental health resources to help ease the anxiety and stress of returning to a classroom for the first time in over 15 months.

"There are students who are [going to be] freshmen and haven't been in [in-person] school since 7th grade," Amina C said of her fellow high school classmates. "They're going to be thrown into this difficult and competitive culture." Amina, a student body president, is working to emphasize mental health at her school and make the culture "less toxic."

Many families are choosing to avoid returning to the classroom altogether.

According to a report by the New York Times, at least 10,000 local public schools lost the enrollment of 20% or more of their kindergartners.

And across 33 states that were surveyed public school enrollment dropped 2%.

Many of those lost enrollments come from parents choosing to delay the start of school for their kindergartners by a year, but a significant number are parents choosing to homeschool their kids for the first time, a trend that could continue to rise as more resources are made available to families.

