



*Perspective*

## *How Do We Decide? Seeking Wisdom as We Reopen Schools*

By M. Paula Phillips

All over the country, parents are scrambling to find adequate childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Southeast Wisconsin, 61% of the providers in the licensed group category were closed, either temporarily or [permanently](#) since March and school districts across the state have varied reopening plans which has increased [stress](#) and [desperation](#). As a school board member that represents nearly 74,000 students and 10,000 employees, I've poured over hundreds of letters from students, parents, and educators pleading that we consider how COVID-19 has altered our world and resolve to do what is best. Sentiments include:

*My child is already falling behind!*

*I miss my friends.*

*How will I be safe?*

*I'm afraid.*

As a parent, I have an undercurrent of anxiety with so many of my choices. Am I being selfish for sending N to daycare? What if my child gets sick? Should I be caring more for my own child instead of advocating for all of our children? How much Daniel Tiger is too much Daniel Tiger?

As a human, it isn't easy for me to untangle the complexity of my emotions most days. I can find hope in our community's ability to raise over \$800,000 to connect our students to needed [WiFi](#) for the virtual start of the school year. I can become enraged when I consider that the decision to reopen schools during a public health crisis is being delegated to local school board members instead of other levels of municipal, state, and/or federal government. There

are times I am paralyzed by how big our problems are, and how small I feel in comparison.

I've learned a lot about emotions as my little one has emerged as an active, curious, and emotional two-year-old. Like Tinkerbell, the moment N feels something, it takes over N's entire body. Joy, anger, silliness, sadness – N feels it all and feels its fullness. Instead of dismissing my toddler's emotions, I've headed the wisdom of Daniel Tiger:

- Feel your emotions (When you get so mad, that you want to roar)
- Use your breath to get back in your body (take a deep breath and count to four)

Taking moments to acknowledge emotions, get back to breathing, and letting one's heart rate come down has been so helpful for my toddler and myself. My little one has shown me how vast and far reaching the human experience is and how resilient and capable we are of getting through it. When I take the time to be mindful and understand what I'm feeling and what my own fears are during these uncertain times, I can identify what I can control and what I cannot. When I stop to take a breath, I avoid vengefully responding to a nasty letter from someone that is questioning my character. When I can acknowledge the difficulty of this time for me as a person, I have greater empathy to [lead](#), understanding how difficult it is for all of us.

It is imperative that all of us understand how uncertainty surrounding reopening schools is increasing the mental load of parents (mothers in particular). In order to practice empathy, we must understand how the current moment is affecting ourselves. Then, we can ask our colleagues how they are navigating their children's education and listen fully.

Consider the composition of your team – who has caregiving responsibilities and who doesn't? What does equity in workload and flexibility look like? Childless employees cannot bear the full load – how are FY21 goals being created to prioritize the most essential things for MCW's remedy and recovery while other priorities are adjusted for everyone's work life balance?

Our solutions for childcare and reopening the economy during a global pandemic, economic recession, and racial uprising cannot be limited to individual families or school districts. As you piecemeal solutions for your family, advocate for broader childcare allocations from state and local governments. Demand that federal funding be provided for all schools to open safely. Remember to breathe and don't stop until every child has access to a safe place and high-quality education.

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