

Students participate in a class at Our Lady of Good Counsel High School in Olney, Md., in this 2018 file photo. Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan overturned a Montgomery County health director's order to keep private schools closed for in-person learning Aug. 3, 2020. (CNS photo/Catholic Standard/Jaclyn Lippelmann)

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Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan removes his face mask as he begins a July 22, 2020, news conference at the Maryland State Capitol in Annapolis, Md., with updates about the state's response to the coronavirus pandemic. Hogan overturned a Montgomery County health director's order to keep private schools closed for in-person learning Aug. 3, 2020. (CNS photo/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)

The Archdiocese of Washington and its Catholic Schools Office hailed the Aug. 3 emergency order by Maryland's governor to override a Montgomery County Health Department blanket directive that would have kept nonpublic schools from reopening for in-person instruction through at least Oct. 1.

The archdiocese said it was grateful for Gov. Larry Hogan's action "that allows private and parochial schools the autonomy and flexibility to make reopening decisions in line with public health guidelines."

"The recovery plan for Maryland public schools stresses local flexibility within the parameters set by state officials," Hogan said in a statement after signing the order. "Private and parochial schools deserve the same opportunity and flexibility (as public schools) to make reopening decisions based on public health guidelines."

Hogan issued the emergency order after Dr. Travis Gayles, Montgomery County's health officer, directed July 31 that private and parochial schools and schools affiliated with religious institutions in that county could not offer in-person instruction at least through Oct. 1 as "necessary to protect the health and safety of Montgomery County residents."

Gayles cited the need to protect the health and safety of Montgomery County residents, parents, students, teachers and staff from the spread of COVID-19.

He said he would "reevaluate the order before Oct. 1 to determine if it should be extended, terminated or amended in any way." He noted that a violation of his directive could be punishable by up to one year in jail, a $5,000 fine or both.

The Archdiocese of Washington was quick to react to that directive. In an Aug. 1 statement, the archdiocese said it would review the order and "decide how best to proceed for students and the entire community."

"The Archdiocese of Washington continues to have the health and well-being of our students, faculty, and parents uppermost in mind and heart as we make our decisions regarding the reopening of our Catholic schools," Washington Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory said Aug. 1. "We will continue to strive to be both good citizens as well as to be faithful to our religious principles, pastoral mission and our obligations to our families."

The Montgomery County directive also was assailed by the Maryland Catholic Conference, which issued a call Aug. 3, before Hogan's action, for Catholics in Montgomery County to contact their county lawmakers and ask them to oppose the directive.

"There is deep concern with Montgomery County summarily announcing private, parochial schools are barred from opening even though they have met health and safety standards," the Catholic conference said in its "action alert" to Montgomery County Catholics. "If you are concerned about the county's action, please urge your County Council member to oppose the order and support the safe reopening of Montgomery County's private, parochial and independent schools."

The conference, which is the public policy arm of the Maryland's Catholic bishops, stressed in its action alert that "many of the county's Catholic and nonpublic schools have developed detailed plans for a safe, full in-person reopening or hybrid (in-person/online) opening These schools have carefully followed guidelines regarding health and safety, consulted with health experts, communicated with parents and developed detailed plans."

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It said that "at the forefront of planning has been the health and safety of the students and teachers."

In mid-July, Karen Salmon, Maryland's superintendent of schools, said the state is "firmly in recovery" and therefore "local (school) systems will have the flexibility to determine, in consultation with their local health officers, how they will open, and which groups of students and staff will be able to reenter buildings."

Hogan noted Aug. 3 that "over the last several weeks, school boards and superintendents made their own decisions about how and when to reopen public schools, after consultation with state and local health officials. ... The blanket closure mandate imposed by Montgomery County was overly broad and inconsistent with the powers intended to be delegated to the county health officer."

He also thanked "all the parents, students, and school administrators who have spoken out in recent days about this important issue."

Gayles' directive also was criticized by lawmakers and others who complained that while public schools had the opportunity to devise their own reopening plans, such an opportunity was not being afforded to religiously affiliated and private schools.

The Archdiocese of Washington's Catholic Schools Office created a task force that spent most of the spring and summer formulating a plan for opening the schools. It was being finalized when the Montgomery County directive was issued.

"To be clear, Maryland's recovery continues to be based on a flexible, community-based approach that follows science, not politics," Hogan said. "As long as schools develop safe and detailed plans that follow CDC (Centers for Disease Control) and state guidelines, they should be empowered to do what's best for their community."

An Aug. 1 statement from the archdiocesan Catholic Schools Office pointed out that it and Gregory "have been working with school pastors and principals to finalize and approve individual Catholic school reopening plans."

"These models (of reopening archdiocesan Catholic schools) include virtual at-home academic instruction, in-person academic instruction and a blended model that includes both virtual and in-person instruction for our students," that statement said. "Great care has been taken by our school leaders to create reopening plans that follow all current state and national guidelines for reopening schools."

In an earlier interview with the archdiocese's Catholic Standard newspaper, Kelly Branaman, interim superintendent of Catholic schools for the archdiocese, said

"reopening our schools in a manner that is safe for our students and faculty is our priority. Health and safety protocols are being established based on guidance from the Centers for Disease Control, local health departments, and local jurisdictions."

She said the task force was devising "habits and routines that promote safety and good health throughout our schools."

In its statement welcoming Hogan's emergency order, the archdiocese said, "We will continue to work with our educators and communities to ensure the safe reopening of the schools of the Archdiocese of Washington and continue to place the health and well-being of our children at the forefront of our efforts."

Even with Hogan's order, the Maryland Catholic Conference urged Montgomery County "parents and parishioners to let their council members know their concern about this issue to ensure they are taken into account now and going forward."