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Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

The 3 million members of the National Education Association, who educate and support 50 million students across the nation, thank you for holding the hearing “School Reopening During COVID-19: Supporting Students, Educators, and Families.” We submit these comments for the record.

Over the past year and a half, educators have negotiated the tremendous challenges of teaching and nurturing students during a pandemic with flexibility and dedication. They quickly taught themselves how to use online teaching technologies, gaining an appreciation for virtual learning’s complexities, benefits, and drawbacks. Given their experiences, educators, perhaps more than anyone, longed for a return to in-person learning; they know firsthand that there is no substitute for looking into their students’ eyes to find out who is getting the lesson, and who is struggling.

However, it is clear that the pandemic continues to strain public education, increasing the burdens on students, families, and educators. We see this daily in the reports of school staff—[including many school bus drivers](#)—who have died from COVID-19 or become severely ill, children who have been infected, and [districtwide or individual school building closures due to COVID cases](#). Relieving this enormous strain means doing all we can to keep students and educators safe. In our strategies for safely reopening schools, we must be mindful of racial and social justice implications due to the pandemic’s outside impact in communities of color and low-income communities.

NEA offers many best practices and resources for school-building reopening and safety on our [Educating Through Crisis](#) and [COVID Testing in Schools](#) web pages, based on our in-depth analysis of data and research. We believe **three pillars** are foundational to providing safe and just schools for all students:

- **The widespread use of [safe and effective vaccines](#)**, in accordance with guidelines from the American Academy of Pediatrics and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for educators and students who are medically eligible;
- **COVID-19 screening testing** for students and school employees without symptoms in order to identify cases and prevent secondary transmission in schools; and
- **The universal and correct use of masks** by students and school staff (with exceptions for children under age 2 and individuals with intellectual disabilities, emotional or orthopedic impairments, or traumatic brain injury).

We also believe safely reopening schools requires:

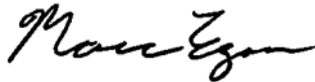
- **Improved ventilation** through bringing more outside air indoors, better air filtration, and the use of portable high-efficiency particulate air fan/filtration systems;
- **Physical distancing** of at least three or six feet between students and adults, depending on context and location in school facilities, with classroom floors marked to indicate where desks and chairs should be

placed, assigned seating, minimal use of shared instructional materials, staggered use of communal spaces, distancing strategies on school buses, and staff meetings and professional development convened virtually;

- **Good hygiene practices**, including regular handwashing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, or use of a hand sanitizer with at least 60-percent alcohol if soap and water are unavailable, and encouragement of students and staff to cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue and wash their hands after blowing their nose or coughing or sneezing into their hands;
- **Identifying and isolating COVID-19 cases** by encouraging students and staff with COVID symptoms to stay home and referring them for diagnostic testing, and notifying anyone who was within six feet of an infected person for at least 15 minutes to also stay home and get tested;
- **Allowing flexible leave for all staff**, including those employees who need to take care of sick family members;
- **Promoting safe extra-curricular participation** through prioritizing outdoor sports and those sports that involve the least physical contact, limiting cross-school transfers, providing pre-packaged snacks, and eliminating locker room use; and
- **Improved cleaning of surfaces**, generally once daily with soap or detergent and water to remove contaminants, and more frequent cleaning for high-touch surfaces such as door handles and stairwell railings (but limited use of toxic products, which can make a building less safe for people with asthma or other respiratory conditions).

All students have the right to safe in-person instruction, and deserve the opportunity to thrive and grow in healthy learning environments. NEA remains committed to providing resource materials and working with Congress to ensure that our public schools are the safest places in the community for every student, educator, and family. Thank you again for the opportunity to share these comments.

Sincerely,



Marc Egan
Director of Government Relations
National Education Association