

# Trump's COVID-19 School Crisis

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When a Georgia student posted a photo of her packed school hallway with virtually no one wearing masks, it went viral. The reaction from those in power was to suspend her rather than figure out how to keep kids and educators safe during a pandemic. Later, of course, they had to take the coronavirus seriously when 35 people at the school tested positive.

That behavior has been the norm in far too many places, and nobody has modeled it more than President Donald Trump. He has spent the entirety of the COVID-19 crisis downplaying the virus and distorting reality, jeopardizing the physical and economic health of Americans.

The facts are clear: We're in the midst of a public health crisis the likes of which we've never experienced in our lifetimes. In the last two weeks of July, 97,000 kids tested positive for the coronavirus, and today the United States has more than 5 million confirmed cases amid a continuing surge.

But Trump, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and other leaders continue to push fiction over facts.

Trump last week dismissed the report of growing cases among children, saying only a "tiny fraction" result in deaths. He and DeVos finally, begrudgingly, acknowledged last week that safeguards were needed, yet they still won't find the resources needed to put them in place.

Trump turned the wearing of masks into a partisan fight. His administration forced states to compete against each other for personal protective equipment. And with record numbers of people still unemployed, and essential services threatened because of the toll the virus has taken on state and local budgets, Trump bypassed Congress by issuing several executive orders he hoped would play well but that do little to help people. DeVos has refused to testify before Congress on reopening schools; she has been working remotely from her Michigan mansion while saying we should go back to school in person. And McConnell just adjourned the Senate until September.

The *New York Times* recently reported that the White House's plan all along was to pass blame and responsibility on to the states, instead of helping people. Trump and his administration have viewed this entire crisis as a political issue, not a human or a moral one.

Their focus remains on pretending COVID-19 doesn't matter rather than fighting it. At every turn, Trump chooses himself, his politics and the rich, at everyone else's expense. With record unemployment and 1.5 million more hungry children since the start of the pandemic, U.S. billionaires added \$584 billion to their own wealth.

## Educators and kids should not be bargaining chips.

Trump's rhetoric on reopening schools echoes the kind of recklessness we saw earlier this year, when he accused nurses of stealing PPE rather than getting them the equipment they desperately needed. And now, ironically, when everyone would have wanted to start the school year in person if it were safe, we are barreling toward the most chaotic and confusing back-to-school in modern history.

Educators, parents and children are angry and scared about schools being forced to reopen without adequate resources for safety protocols. They've seen what happened in another Georgia district, where more than 1,000 students and educators are now quarantined days after reopening. Or in places like Florida, where the governor demanded schools reopen despite the state having one of the biggest COVID-19 surges—and where our state affiliate sued to protect the health and safety of students and educators. At one Florida school, an entire class had to

be quarantined the day after reopening, yet the teacher is being required to lead remote learning from that same classroom. Educators, students and parents alike feel abandoned by their government, whose leaders, for the most part, have had months to come up with plans and resources and have failed.

There are some bright spots, where science and safety are the standards, not politics. In New York, Gov. Andrew Cuomo has made clear that parents and teachers must be confident that schools are safe before they can reopen, and in Los Angeles, educators and school officials developed a plan to make distance learning work. But in most of the country, virtually everywhere you look there is chaos and confusion, which is why polls show 59 percent of Americans now oppose fully reopening schools.

When it comes to the health and safety of our children, we must spare no expense, put politics aside and act immediately. In-school instruction is important, but safety is more important. Educators and kids should not be bargaining chips or have their health jeopardized. Reopening schools should be based on science, not on spin, which is what we tried to do with the reopening plan the AFT developed in April. That's why we've been mobilizing to get the Senate to act to fund schools. And why, at our convention, we supported educators employing safety strikes as a last resort if the health and safety needs of their students and themselves are not being met.

As educators and health professionals, we are guided by facts and helping those we serve. It would be nice if the president of the United States were guided by the same moral compass.



Weingarten delivers her keynote address at the AFT's 2020 convention.

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