

Guide to Bringing Parents, Patients, Students and Community Together to Reopen America's Schools Safely and Equitably





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Our Mission

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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It is no secret that our nation’s public schools have historically been underfunded and were not adequately prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, that lack of investment only exacerbated the inequality facing our most vulnerable students. In order to reopen America’s public schools safely and equitably, we must address the conditions both inside schools and outside, in our communities. This will require rethinking how we ensure the health and safety of our students, educators, school staff, parents and broader community. It will also require greater investment in our school communities than before the COVID-19 pandemic—not less.

This guide is intended to be used along with the AFT’s “A Plan to Safely Reopen America’s Schools and Communities.” Our plan calls for:

- 1.** Maintaining physical distancing until the number of new cases declines for at least 14 consecutive days.
- 2.** Putting in place the infrastructure and resources to test, trace and isolate new cases.
- 3.** Deploying the public health tools that prevent the virus’ spread, and aligning them with education strategies that meet the needs of students.
- 4.** Involving workers, unions, parents and communities in all planning.
- 5.** Investing in recovery: Do not abandon America’s communities or forfeit America’s future.

The power of union and community coming together is more important than ever. We must use this unique moment in history and the reopening of America’s schools to ensure our communities receive the education ALL students deserve. Below are some tools and resources to help guide your work in this process.

PHASE I

STEP 1: CONVENE A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION ON HOW TO REOPEN SAFELY. [See attachment]

Share the AFT plan as a conversation starter and create dialogue around:

- ▶ What are the challenges and opportunities created by COVID-19? Begin the community healing process; this has been an emotional and traumatic event for students and families. For example, how did the district respond to the crisis, including addressing: distance learning, the technology gap, meals and nutrition, mental health of students, and accommodations for students with disabilities, English language learners, and students with informal housing arrangements?
- ▶ What are the conditions inside our schools we must address as part of reopening?
- ▶ What are the conditions outside our schools that affect our students and families that we must address as part of reopening?

- ▶ What do people like about the AFT's reopening plan that should be included in our local plan?
- ▶ What is missing that we want addressed for our district, city and or state?

Create a survey to identify important issues and concerns:

- ▶ Consider creating a simple online survey for your members and community to fill out about what they think is most important to address in terms of the health and well-being of students and the school community.
- ▶ In addition to online surveys, consider using Hustle as a quick way to do a poll, or hold a telephone town hall using Maestro and Zoom so you can ask questions and get just-in-time responses.

STEP 2: CREATE YOUR OWN COMMUNITY TASKFORCE OR ALLIANCE TO INFORM THE REOPENING PROCESS.

Who should be involved?

- ▶ Start with your core of stakeholders, who share your values and have a direct connection to students, families and neighborhoods; make sure they reflect the racial, ethnic and cultural diversity of your community—e.g., parents, students, education advocates, community groups, healthcare advocates and other unions.
- ▶ Then cast a wider net to leverage power, influence and broader relationships, again making sure they reflect the racial, ethnic and cultural diversity of your community—consider local foundations, faith leaders, immigrant rights groups, small businesses, advocates for senior citizens, like-minded school board and city council members, policy think tank groups, social justice/civil rights groups and service organizations like United Way, Boys & Girls Club, etc.

What should it do?

- ▶ Identify a set of priorities/requirements for reopening schools in your district, including education, health and other critical issues affecting families. Consider community schools as a potential strategy to inform your list.
- ▶ Include what is not acceptable or would make the situation worse, such as budget cuts, reduction in staff, larger class sizes, etc.
- ▶ Include alternatives to budget cuts and austerity, such as progressive revenue solutions that make the 1 percent and corporations pay their fair share, and asking the private sector and philanthropy to help pay.

How often should it meet?

- ▶ This body should be invited and meet right away. We are losing time each day as politicians claim the only thing to do is make cuts due to the economic impacts of COVID-19.
- ▶ Meet as needed. Every two weeks is a good pace.

- ▶ Consider creating advisory groups that can work with other critical stakeholders such as the school district, mayor's office and local government agencies. It may be useful to advocate for union and community leaders to serve on these various groups to ensure their voices are heard.
- ▶ Utilize online digital platforms—Zoom, Google Hangout, etc., to make the meetings accessible to everyone. Not everyone will be ready to gather in person right away.

PHASE II

STEP 3: PUBLICLY LAUNCH YOUR LOCAL PRIORITIES/ DEMANDS/PLAN TO REOPEN SCHOOLS.

Solidify your priorities and demands, and develop a way to release them together.

- ▶ This could take the form of a letter addressed to elected officials and jointly signed by lots of organizations and people of influence who agree with your plan.
- ▶ It could also be something more comprehensive, like the plan the AFT has released nationally.
- ▶ The more stakeholders who sign on in support of your plan, the stronger it will seem to decision-makers.

Share your plan publicly and try to get the media to cover it.

- ▶ Consider writing op-eds to reinforce what you share.
- ▶ Ask everyone who supports your plan to share it with their networks.
- ▶ Consider using diverse local media outlets that are representative of the students and communities you serve. Language-accessible and community newspapers are effective ways of getting the message across.

STEP 4: TURN YOUR LOCAL PLAN INTO A COMMUNITY ORGANIZING CAMPAIGN.

Launch a petition campaign.

- ▶ Turn your set of demands into a petition that allows individuals to sign in support.
- ▶ The more people who read, understand and take action in support of your local plan, the more likely it is to succeed.

Organize meetings with elected officials/decision-makers to discuss your plan and directly and clearly ask them to support it.

- ▶ These meetings can be scheduled virtually.

- ▶ Make sure these meetings include a diverse set of stakeholders to show the breadth and power of your campaign.
- ▶ Prepare fact sheets and talking points that list all of the ways students, educators and families have been affected by COVID-19.
 - These will be important to bring real-life stories of people to this effort.
 - Remember, make information available in different languages represented in the community.
 - The AFT has created a number of these resources, which can be found at www.aft.org/coronavirus.

Develop creative ways for your members and community to show support.

- ▶ Consider creating sample social media graphics and posts that can easily be shared by your members and community allies.
- ▶ Organize virtual happy hours and casual conversations where people can discuss what they can do personally to ensure schools reopen safely.
- ▶ Organize virtual rallies where lots of people can join and hear directly from students, parents, educators, nurses, community leaders and union leaders about what is at stake and why they must act now.
- ▶ Organize reopening caravan rallies where supporters who have access to vehicles can drive around high-traffic parts of town, school district buildings and other places to be visible.
 - Supporters can write messages on their car windows or tape posters with messages inside for people to see.

PHASE III

STEP 5: PREPARE TO HOLD DECISION-MAKERS ACCOUNTABLE AND APPLY PRESSURE.

Start petition or letter-writing campaigns.

- ▶ Direct these toward individual decision-makers. If they say they will not support the components of your reopening plans they may change their mind after hearing their position is unpopular to lots of voters in the district.

Create “I Pledge to Vote Based on Reopening Correctly” materials for people to sign.

- ▶ The more elected officials see that their support for your reopening plan is connected to their own election, the more they will take it seriously.

Create “report cards” for decision-makers.

- ▶ List all of the local politicians who support your plan and give them an A+.
- ▶ Give the politicians who are opposed to your plan an F.
- ▶ Give corporations and other bad actors an F as well, for contributing to lack of

LOOK FORWARD TO BACK TO SCHOOL: WE CANNOT REOPEN SCHOOLS THAT ARE UNSAFE AND INEQUITABLE.

Start conversations early about what you do if schools look worse, not better, in the fall.

- ▶ No one wants their schools to have fewer resources or be less safe during this pandemic. At the same time, most parents and families want their kids to be able to go back to school this fall. Local economies want this too.
- ▶ If things are not looking good at back-to-school time, start to have conversations in your community about what people are prepared to do if the conditions for reopening schools safely have not been met.
- ▶ Don't wait until the week before school starts to have these conversations; give people time to be informed and prepared to make the best decisions for their families.

Guide to Community Conversation on Reopening America's Schools Safely



Welcome

- Thank everyone for making time to be part of this critical conversation during such a challenging moment for families, working people and communities.
- Acknowledge that you understand that while everyone has had to deal with the impacts of COVID-19, it has disproportionately affected some parts of the community more than others.
- That is why you have made it a priority to include many voices in this community conversation.

Purpose

- Make it clear to everyone that the purpose of this conversation is to develop a set of priorities and guidelines for what must happen in order to reopen public schools safely and equitably for students, educators, school staff and families.

Introductions

- Have everyone go around and briefly introduce themselves, their affiliations and what they are hoping to get out of this conversation. If they have connections to a particular school or neighborhood, that may be important to share.

Getting Started

- Use the following questions to guide your conversation. Be sure to have a note taker assigned to capture what is said. Try to make sure as many voices as possible are heard and that one person does not dominate the meeting. Encourage the facilitator of the meeting to summarize the themes being discussed and to suggest people with new ideas add to the conversation to avoid repetition.
 - ▶ What are the conditions inside our schools we must address as part of reopening? (Consider topics below.)
 1. Handling emergency cases
 2. Entry process/Screening
 3. Protections for at-risk staff and at-risk students
 4. Smaller class sizes
 5. Monitoring access to school facilities
 6. Transportation
 7. Staggered lunch and meal times
 8. Special student populations

9. Training for staff, students and parents
 10. Alternative plans for after-school programs, sports, recreation and physical fitness
 11. Space and time considerations
 12. Personal protective equipment and sanitation
 13. Mental health supports for students
 14. Ensuring high-quality instruction
 15. Additional supports
- ▶ What are the conditions outside our schools that affect our students and families that we must address as part of reopening? (Consider topics below.)
 1. Supports for parents and families who have experienced job loss and lack access to healthcare or other benefits of employment
 2. Access to broadband and technology to close the digital divide
 3. Access to food and nutritional support for families and community
 4. Preventing further job loss and economic hardship
 5. Essential services that provide care and treatment for parents and families
 6. Mental health supports for parents and families
 - ▶ What do people like about the AFT reopening plan?
 - ▶ What is missing that we want addressed for our district, our city and or state?
 - ▶ Is there anything else anyone wants to add to this conversation that hasn't been addressed yet?

Wrap Up and Next Steps

- Thank everyone for their contributions to the conversation. Assure them that a summary of this discussion will be written up and shared with the group.
- Propose a next step or follow-up meeting that will focus on how the ideas discussed can be included in your plan for reopening schools.



Fact Sheet on
Need for Federal and
State Investment

Investing in recovery: What it will take to restore our communities and revive our economy

We can't simply limp out of the COVID-19 crisis. The AFT is urging elected leaders to not abandon America's communities or forfeit America's future. Reopening and recovery will take more—not less—investment in public health, schools, universities, hospitals, and local and state governments.

- Even with the \$2 trillion CARES Act rescue package passed in March, the White House predicts 20 percent unemployment by June—the highest since the 1930s.¹ In the coming fiscal year, states face shortfalls of between \$360 billion and \$500 billion, on top of new costs for combating COVID-19.²
- What does this mean for American jobs? There are roughly 20 million state and local employees in the United States. The 2008 financial meltdown cost nearly 600,000 state and local government jobs (teachers made up half the job loss).³
- The current recession will likely outpace those layoffs, making the economy's downturn even deeper.⁴ As the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities notes, during the Great Recession “steep state and local spending cuts, which included steep layoffs, added to the economy's freefall and were a drag on the economy's growth for years after the recession ended.”⁵
- Federal support to states, cities and towns is key to protect the public services that communities depend on. EMTs, police officers, transportation and sanitation workers, home care providers, the U.S. Postal Service, and other frontline workers provide the services needed to fight this pandemic, get people back to work and reopen our economy.
- COVID-19 has taken a terrible toll on working families, spotlighting deep inequalities in our society. Delaying federal aid will force harsh cuts in food assistance, unemployment benefits, health coverage and other supports for struggling families, just when they need help the most.
- It's not a choice between investing in public services and communities on one hand, and economic recovery on the other. Economic recovery can't happen without strong public services and the help to get families back on their feet.
- This isn't a red state or blue state issue. Mayors and governors from both parties say federal help is crucial to regain ground lost to the economic shutdown the pandemic caused.

Thus, the AFT is fighting for massive federal investment in our states, cities and towns so we can rein in the pandemic, launch a safe reopening, and support our families and communities. Congress should:

- Make an immediate, substantial reinvestment—at least \$750 billion—in state and local governments, on top of the important first steps in the CARES Act and related legislation.
- Support the National Governors Association’s call for \$500 billion in additional funds to meet state budgetary shortfalls.
- Provide at least \$175 billion for the Education Stabilization Fund, distributed directly to local education agencies and institutions of higher education. Provide \$50 billion in direct funding for public colleges and universities, and institutions that serve minorities.
- Provide significant additional funding for Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and for high-quality, voluntary summer school and extended learning time.
- Invest in closing the digital divide. High-speed broadband, reliable mobile service, and modern technology and hardware are now core infrastructure needs of businesses, schools and homes.
- Substantially increase Medicaid funding, provide free COVID-19 testing and treatment for all, and increase support for providers assisting underserved populations.
- Cover 100 percent of COBRA health insurance premiums for those workers now unemployed through no fault of their own, or who lost health insurance due to the death of the carrier.
- Permanently expand eligibility for unemployment benefits to many previously uncovered workers, and extend unemployment benefits for an additional 13 weeks.
- Boost maximum SNAP benefits by 15 percent. Increase the minimum payment from \$16 to \$30.
- Cancel student debt, which has effectively “indentured” a generation. If only to stimulate our economy, it is time to free people of this burden.

A progressive vision for recovery

- With interest rates and inflation at historic lows, the federal government should continue to borrow to fulfill its role and support state and local services. It is not the time to be concerned about deficits. And the government should be prepared to raise taxes to fund our future.
- American voters overwhelmingly approve of significant federal funding for states, cities and towns to counter the devastating economic effects of the coronavirus on the economy and vital public services, new polling by Hart Research Associates reveals.⁶ And they decisively reject the “state bankruptcy” alternative proposed by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell.
- By a 3-to-1 margin, voters say funding for education, healthcare and other public services is more important than keeping down government spending and debt. They are far more concerned that the government won’t spend enough to support the economy than that it will spend too much.
- States also will have an important role. In Illinois and California, there are initiatives on the ballot this fall to raise revenues by asking those who have more to pay more. More states should look to emulate these efforts in the coming days.
- This is the time to reimagine a better America and a pathway to a better life for all. We can afford to make these investments; we cannot afford to fail.

Endnotes

- ¹ M. Egan, "White House Economist: Unemployment Could Hit 20% by June," CNN Business, 4/28/20, www.cnn.com/2020/04/28/business/jobs-unemployment-coronavirus-hassett/index.html.
- ² E. McNichol, M. Leachman, and J. Marshall, "States Need Significantly More Fiscal Relief to Slow the Emerging Deep Recession," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 4/14/20, www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/states-need-significantly-more-fiscal-relief-to-slow-the-emerging-deep.
- ³ P. Elliott, "'There Are Going to Be Layoffs.' State and Local Governments Brace for Cuts as Budget Crisis Looms," Time, 4/23/20, <https://time.com/5826016/states-budget-crisis-coronavirus/>.
- ⁴ Y. Mui and K. J. Sloan, "Massive Layoffs and Pay Cuts Are Likely Coming to State and Local Governments as Federal Aid Goes Elsewhere," CNBC, 4/22/20, www.cnbc.com/2020/04/22/coronavirus-relief-bill-layoffs-coming-to-state-local-governments.html.
- ⁵ McNichol, Leachman, and Marshall, "States Need Significantly More."
- ⁶ "Supermajority of Americans Support Stimulus for States, Cities and Towns," AFT press release, 5/13/20, www.aft.org/press-release/supermajority-americans-support-stimulus-states-cities-and-towns.

**Summary of the AFT's
'A Plan to Safely Reopen
America's Schools and
Communities'**



Safely reopening our public schools is key for ensuring our students regain educational ground and for restarting the broader economy. Here's how our union can help make the "new normal" work so children can continue learning and everyone in the school community can stay safe and well.

BEFORE WE REOPEN: THE RIGHT CONDITIONS

- Maintain physical distancing until the number of new cases declines for at least 14 days in a row.
- Keep it local: Even if a state decides it can ease off on physical distancing requirements, if new cases pop up in our local community we'll need to wait.
- Have the capacity to test, trace and isolate new cases, so we can quickly control any second wave that emerges—a process unions and school districts can help with.
- Plan inclusively: Unions, districts and communities must plan together for the issues involved in returning to school, from hand-washing stations to resources for traumatized students.
- Ensure educators and staff have the appropriate personal protective equipment and the training to use it right.
- Maintain or expand grab-and-go nutrition programs until schools can take over, as food insecurity remains a pressing issue for far too many students.

STAYING SAFE ONCE WE REOPEN

- Implement physical distancing, including limiting the number of people who can be in a school, a hallway, an auditorium or a classroom at one time.
- Require hand-washing on entry to all schools, with soap and water or hand sanitizer.
- Screen for symptoms in children and staff, including temperature-taking if the CDC recommends it.
- Create an isolation room for newly suspected cases, and a secondary area for handling other non-COVID-19-related student illnesses or injuries.
- Develop clear protocols for notifying students, parents and staff who have come into close or sustained contact with confirmed cases.
- Protect at-risk staff and students, including giving at-risk educators the option to teach remotely and enabling at-risk students to learn remotely.

CHANGING HOW WE DO THINGS

- Reduce class sizes to 12-15 students per class, to maintain physical distancing.
- Implement split scheduling (alternating days of the week/times of the day for classes and activities) to limit the number of students physically present in the building at any given time.
- Adjust transportation to provide staggered arrival times and multiple arrival locations to limit large gatherings of students.
- Stagger lunch and mealtimes, and make “hand-washing recesses” part of the schedule throughout the day for all students and staff.
- Make alternative plans for after-school programs, sports, recreation and physical fitness, if necessary, to ensure they follow health protocols.
- Sanitize school facilities daily to prevent transmission of the virus, with an increase in staff if needed.
- Stay flexible—because different schools, different districts, different student needs and even different rooms will require customizing solutions to keep everyone safe.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

- Plan for special student populations (including students with disabilities, underlying health conditions, asthma or respiratory illness) and for special education requirements.
- Provide up-to-date information on COVID-19 risk factors and prevention for students parents, families, teachers and school staff.
- This summer, bring in small groups of the students who most need catch-up time and instruction for a voluntary multiweek summer session.
- Provide training for all staff, students and parents to help identify students struggling with trauma and ensure they are referred to mental health professionals for additional support if appropriate.
- Make sure that families and community leaders have a seat at the table and a strong voice when reopening decisions are made.
- Be ready for the possibility that schools will have to temporarily close again, including by: expanding access to broadband and technology to close the digital divide among students, providing professional development for teachers and staff around distance learning, and rethinking student assessments so precious learning time is not lost to excessive testing.

FIGHTING FOR THE INVESTMENTS OUR SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES NEED TO SAFELY REOPEN AND RECOVER

- Advocate for the community schools model, where schools set up partnerships with community organizations to provide a range of services to students and families, including tutoring, health services, after-school programs and adult education classes.
- Fight for the federal and state funding it will take to help America's schools, communities and economy recover. Tell politicians: Do not abandon America's communities or forfeit America's future.

For more on how we can imagine and create a new normal that works for public education, see the AFT's comprehensive reopening plan at:

https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/covid19_reopen-america-schools.pdf



Sample Op-Ed

**'Don't Forfeit Our Future:
Reopening Schools Safely,
Responsibly, and with the
Resources Our Kids Deserve'**





Don't Forfeit Our Future: Reopening Schools Safely, Responsibly, and with the Resources Our Kids Deserve

Teachers and school staff can't wait to be back at school with our students, when public health experts say it's safe to do so. We worry about our kids. We miss them. And as hard as we (and our students and their families) have worked on remote learning, we know there is vital educational ground to make up. It will be a great day when school doors open, and I hope and believe that day is coming soon.

But we can't reopen safely without serious investment in all of the essential services that keep our communities going, including public schools. Cities and towns are struggling: Revenue is plummeting, unemployment is soaring, and they have huge unexpected expenses to protect health and safety. To reignite our economy and invest in our children's future, it will be crucial to reopen schools, which will require a real shot in the arm to the state budgets that fund them. Thankfully, governors around the country, Democrats and Republicans alike, are calling for the next COVID-19 relief bill to include another \$500 billion to stabilize their states, prevent another wave of layoffs, and avoid deep cuts to public services like schools, healthcare centers and public safety.

We also can't reopen safely without a plan, and one that's comprehensive and trustworthy, so parents and families can feel safe sending their children back to school. A plan isn't just crossing our fingers. It isn't ignoring a possible second wave of the coronavirus this fall or winter. A plan isn't charging ahead because the virus is less risky for children. Yes, it largely seems to be—still, doctors are learning about rare but serious dangers for children, such as pediatric multisystem inflammatory syndrome, which can cause heart damage. So we need to be alert and aware, but not overwhelmed by anxiety—because a plan isn't about giving in to “gloom and doom” either. Our kids have absorbed enough fear and alarm.

A plan is a strategy that combines public health needs with public education needs. We can do this. Our union's national affiliate, the American Federation of Teachers, has worked with local leaders like me to create a blueprint (www.aft.org/reopen-schools) for reopening safely. To make it happen, we'll need to:

- **Be ready:** Before schools can open, the number of new cases in our own community—not just statewide—should decline for at least 14 days in a row. We'll also need the capacity to test, trace and isolate new cases, a process our union and our school district can help with.

The American Federation of Teachers is a union of 1.7 million professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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- **Change the way we do things:** This might mean masks, temperature checks, social distancing and staggered classes, activities, transportation and mealtimes. It might mean hand-washing every hour on the hour. It will mean frequent sanitizing of school buildings. It will mean personal protective equipment for teachers and school staff, so we can stay well and stay on the job.
- **Protect the vulnerable:** This includes giving at-risk educators and staff the option to teach or work remotely and enabling at-risk students to learn remotely. It also means identifying and supporting students struggling with trauma.
- **Make sure everyone has a voice in reopening decisions:** Parents, families, students and community leaders—plus teachers and school staff—should have a seat at the table and a strong voice when reopening decisions are made. The decisions we make now are like none we've made before, and we need to make them together.
- **Reclaim the joy of teaching and learning:** These have been hard times. Human beings, especially children, aren't meant to be apart. But through it all, we've seen the resilient, hopeful human spirit shining through in so many ways. That's the spirit we'll need as we reopen schools. Teachers and school staff will be welcoming the kids back with smiles on our faces and a renewed joy in our work. Doing the homework to reopen safely is just a "prerequisite" to what really matters: being together and learning together again.
- **Invest in reopening and recovery for our schools and our economy:** As I said earlier, this will require a significant federal investment in public health and our public schools. But it's an investment that's worth it, and that voters want. By a 3-to-1 ratio, voters say funding for education, healthcare and other public services is more important than keeping down government spending and debt, new polling by Hart Research Associates reveals.

If we follow these key principles, we can chart a path to reopen our schools that is based on both science and educational best practices, and make sure it's funded, too. That's the way to protect our precious children and ensure the great education and promising future we want for them, long after this pandemic is just a memory.