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March 5, 2020

The Honorable Betsy DeVos,
Secretary,
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary DeVos,

On behalf of the 1.7 million members of the American Federation of Teachers—the vast majority of whom are the teachers, classroom aides, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, higher education faculty, and school nurses on the frontlines of teaching and caring for our nation’s children and young adults, as well as our healthcare professional members, many of whom are working in hospitals where there are or are likely to be confirmed cases—I write with questions about the U.S. Department of Education’s communication and preparedness to address COVID-19 in schools, and to share AFT’s work on this issue.

At the heart of our work is the belief that schools aren’t just places of instruction: Many students rely on school for nutritional meals, disability support, and other care. If schools close, students’ learning and academic needs won’t be met, and their social, emotional and developmental needs won’t be either. Because our schools and our union perform vital community services, the AFT has developed resources for our members, the communities they serve, and the general public on the impact of COVID-19. You can find these resources at <https://www.aft.org/coronavirus> and on sharemylesson.com/coronavirus. Specifically, we’d like to share the following with you as your agency and your appointed COVID-19 task force communicate with schools and other federal agencies.

Precautions

As has been stated in many venues and platforms—hand washing, cleaning and disinfecting surfaces, and staying home when you’re sick are crucial acts of prevention especially in high-population or density settings like schools and school buses. School districts need a plan to keep the employees who are doing the lion’s share of disinfecting and cleaning safe, compensated, trained and properly supplied for whatever work may be asked of them. This concern is critical—many districts struggle to afford a school nurse every day. Where do they find the resources to hire additional staff and buy cleaning supplies?

Preparedness

We hope school closures that last for days or weeks don't happen, but if a decision is made by the appropriate health agencies to close schools for the health and safety of those who learn and work there, then we need plans in place that look out for kids, teachers and their families. We need coordination between Cabinet secretaries because we cannot allow the nutritional, emotional and social needs of students to go unmet due to a COVID-19 school closure. On the academic end of the needs spectrum, it is crucial to remember that online resources are a stopgap measure, and those tools aren't always available in every district. We recommend developing alternative procedures to ensure continuity of instruction, such as telephone trees, mailed lessons and assignments, and instruction via local radio or TV stations in the event of lengthy closures. Special care must be given to plan for supporting students with individualized education programs, and for communicating in languages other than English.

Transparency

A key component of preparedness and precautions is clear, consistent, transparent and collaborative information sharing. That may sound obvious, but I have members in Italy and elsewhere overseas who aren't being told anything about the disease spreading there, but are being told to report to work, even though the schools are closed to students.

Questions for Federal, State and Local Officials

I have led several discussions with AFT members and leaders regarding their concerns and questions on the new coronavirus and how to protect themselves and the students and communities they serve. As your task force works on this issue—and communicates with state and local officials on a response—I offer several of their questions to you as you craft guidance for school systems.

1. Does the coronavirus response plan include the requirements of students with special needs (e.g., students from low-income families who rely on school food services for daily meals), those in special facilities (e.g., juvenile justice facilities) as well as those who do not speak English as their first language? If not, when will the plan be revised to include these considerations?
2. What is the procedure to ensure regular and rigorous environmental cleaning and decontamination of surfaces and equipment? What protections will be put in place for the individuals providing this service?
3. What chemical disinfectants are likely to be used for decontamination? Will safety data sheets be available for any disinfectant applied in schools? Will staff receive hazard communication training for new disinfectants and thorough training on appropriate use?
4. Has the school system worked with the local health department to address provisions for psychological support services for staff, students, and their families during and after a pandemic?

5. Are there measures in place to ensure that affordable and accessible testing for the virus is in place for those potentially affected who want to be tested, in line with guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention?
6. Has the system developed scenarios describing the potential impact of a pandemic on student learning (e.g., student and staff absences, school closings, extracurricular activities) based on having various levels of illness among staff and students?
7. Has the system developed alternative procedures to ensure continuity of instruction (e.g., web-based distance instruction, telephone trees, mailed lessons and assignments, instruction via local radio or TV stations, etc.) in the event of district school closures?
8. Has the school system developed a continuity-of-operations plan for essential central office functions, including payroll and ongoing communications with students and parents?
9. Has the district secured sufficient and accessible infection-prevention supplies, such as soap, alcohol-based/waterless hand hygiene products containing at least 60 percent alcohol, tissues and receptacles for their disposal?
10. What is the communication plan for disseminating information to staff, students and families; and does the plan ensure language, culture and reading-level appropriateness?
11. Is there a plan in place to test platforms (e.g., hotlines, telephone trees, dedicated websites, and local radio or TV stations, etc.) for communicating pandemic status and actions to school staff, students and families?
12. What is the plan to close schools if necessary?

This is an understandably worrisome time for everyone: kids, adults, all of us. I implore you to work with the AFT and our members on the frontlines of this public health crisis. We stand ready to work with the Education Department to ensure the health and safety of America's schools, hospitals, workplaces and all of our public spaces.

Sincerely,



Randi Weingarten
President

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