

Confronting coronavirus

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I had a disconcerting realization this week: The most accurate and trustworthy information I have learned about the COVID-19 pandemic has come from colleagues, governors, mayors and family members in the medical profession—not from the federal government. Our leaders must respond to public health emergencies with factual information and guidance about prevention and precautions, testing and treatment, and managing the long-term health, economic and societal impacts of the emergency. By any measure, President Trump has failed that test.

Trump is not responsible for the new coronavirus, but, as president, he is responsible for his administration's response to it. Thankfully, on Friday, the federal government finally declared the pandemic a national emergency, but only after this administration had made false claims about the virus, downplayed the risks to public health, and failed to respond with the necessary speed, scope and seriousness. In China and South Korea, widespread testing to guide the appropriate response seems to have stemmed the spread of COVID-19. Without that in the United States, experts warn that the virus is likely spreading unchecked, and now fear has overcome facts.

We should be clear-eyed about the risks, but we should not panic. It's essential to understand the impact of decisions such as closing schools, which now seems inevitable.

Public schools are much more than places of learning. They are often the safest spaces in any community and, for millions of children, the only place they can count on receiving nutritious meals and healthcare. That is why closing schools is a last resort, and those that remain open must use appropriate cleaning products and methods, enforce frequent hand washing and other hygiene precautions, and require people who are sick or who have been exposed to COVID-19 to stay home.

The lack of adequate tests for COVID-19 has forced many school districts and entire states to close schools to reduce the transmission of the virus. There are many important considerations when schools close, and chief among them are issues of equity. Thirty million children receive free or reduced-price meals at school; governments must ensure that no child goes hungry during school closures. Another concern is the digital divide; many students do not have access to the technology required for distance learning during school closures. And distance learning is not appropriate for many English language learners and students with learning disabilities. Custodians

and others charged with sanitizing closed schools must have the appropriate training, equipment and protections. Many teachers and professors are doing their best to provide distance learning, often without any training. The AFT's Share My Lesson has resources and peer support to help with this. But let's be clear: Distance learning is no substitute for getting back to school when this crisis abates.

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Defeating this epidemic must be a whole-society effort. AFT members are stepping up—from nurses administering tests for COVID-19 in New York and treating patients in Oregon and Washington, to educators in Cleveland filling “blizzard bags” with food and at-home lessons, and school employees in low-income communities nationwide working to provide 6 million free books to their students. The AFT has worked with experts to prepare resources and guidance to protect the health and safety of children, families, communities and frontline healthcare providers. That information is available at www.aft.org/coronavirus.

We urge the swift passage of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act proposed by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. This legislation contains

crucial funding to fight the spread of COVID-19 and help ensure that our economy and working people and their families are protected during this health crisis. It includes emergency paid sick leave, free coronavirus testing, provisions to protect frontline healthcare workers, food assistance for seniors and vulnerable children and families, and additional funding to states for the ongoing economic consequences of the pandemic. This bill, combined with the initial \$8.3 billion in emergency funding to fight the coronavirus, is the start of what is needed. A robust economic stimulus will also be needed to recover from what economists believe will be a recession.

The COVID-19 pandemic brings new urgency to confronting life-threatening governmental and societal failures in the United States—including dangerous cuts to the nation's public health infrastructure, the lack of paid sick leave for all workers, and the unconscionable number of Americans who are uninsured or underinsured. And school closures in response to the epidemic have exposed more failures, such as the gaping digital divide and the food insecurity millions of children endure in our country.

These failures put into sharp relief much of what is wrong in the United States. But this crisis also has illuminated much of what is right—like the healthcare professionals, janitors, neighbors and so many more who are caring for others. America will get through this. And we must dedicate ourselves to emerging as a country that is stronger, healthier, more equitable and more united.



Photo: Matthew Jones

Weingarten, right, with members of the Ohio State University Nurses Organization.

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