



American Federation
of Teachers, AFL-CIO

AFT Teachers
AFT PSRP
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March 23, 2021

The Honorable Dr. Miguel Cardona
Secretary, U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

The Honorable Dr. Rochelle Walensky,
Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
395 E Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20024

Dear Dr. Cardona and Dr. Walensky:

I noted Friday's shift in Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance around physical distancing in schools with keen interest. As we have shared with you previously, AFT members trust the CDC and their union above all other entities to provide them with accurate information that will keep them, their families, their students and their communities safe during this pandemic.

As you also know, although I was very worried about the implications of the shift, I reserved judgment until we could review the new studies that were presented. We have done that this weekend, including those in the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* as well as the studies cited in the Institute for New Economic Thinking's "New CDC Guidelines to Reopen Schools Could Be Dangerous."¹

We appreciate that the body of knowledge regarding the impact of COVID-19 in school environments is expanding, but we are not convinced that the evidence supports changing physical distancing requirements at this time. Our concern is that the cited studies do not identify the baseline mitigation strategies needed to support 3 feet of physical distancing. Moreover, they were not conducted in our nation's highest-density and least-resourced schools, which have poor ventilation, crowding and other structural challenges.

One thing the studies were clear on is the need for layered mitigation if there is a shift to reduce physical distancing. Now that we have had a chance to review the research, we conclude that any shift from 6 feet to 3 feet must be accompanied by, at a minimum, universal and correct masking; effective ventilation; thorough cleaning of buildings; regular COVID-19 testing of teachers, staff and students; effective contact tracing and quarantine/isolation protocols; and the availability of vaccines to all people in schools who are eligible.

Weakening one layer of layered mitigation demands that the other layers must be strengthened. We strongly urge you, in any discussion of this shift, to forcefully insist on strict and strengthened adherence to the other mitigation strategies.

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.

¹<https://www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/blog/new-cdc-guidelines-to-reopen-schools-could-be-dangerous>



After months of mixed messaging and misinformation, consistency from our public health officials is a welcome change. But as educators with the expertise on how physical distancing works in schools, we have immediate logistical questions:

- With the guidance that students can be 3 feet apart from each other but adults should remain 6 feet from children or other adults, what is the expectation for the teacher in a classroom—that she remain in one spot at the front of the room the entire day, not moving about the classroom?
- How will paraprofessionals work in reading circles or other small-group settings? Does this also apply to bus drivers and school bus protocol—i.e., will students be 3 feet from each other on buses, but 6 feet from a bus driver or a bus attendant?
- With the increased number of in-person students, can we end the practice of concurrently teaching in person and simulcasting to students at home. Alternatively, can we provide guidance on the negative effects of this practice?
- What is the expected timeline for implementation of these changes? Many school systems are just returning to in-person instruction right now, after significant planning—for bus routes, staggered schedules, etc.—based on 6 feet of physical distancing. Even with the significant investment of American Rescue Plan money, districts lack the human resources and institutional planning ability to make changes like this quickly. Is this something that can be implemented in the fall, or perhaps the summer?

We ask that the Education Department, in conjunction with the CDC, release a national checklist outlining the enhanced mitigation strategies that must be in place if we move to 3 feet physical distancing, and provide details about how to ensure that 3 feet of physical distancing is implemented properly. We also request that the CDC conduct comparative studies on mitigation efforts in urban, densely populated schools that do not have up-to-date ventilation systems and have been systematically under-resourced for decades. This will help in planning for summer and the next school year.

AFT members want to trust the CDC to keep all of us safe, and to trust the Education Department to have students', families' and educators' well-being as its goal. Your responses to this letter's requests will help ensure this. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Randi Weingarten
President

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