



A Union of Professionals

STATEMENT OF
RANDI WEINGARTEN
PRESIDENT, AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY
SELECT SUBCOMMITTEE ON CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC
FOR A HEARING ENTITLED
“THE CONSEQUENCES OF SCHOOL CLOSURES, PART 2:
THE PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS,
MS. RANDI WEINGARTEN”
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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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Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Ruiz and Members of the Select Subcommittee:

On behalf of the 1.7 million members of the American Federation of Teachers, I am glad to appear before you today to set the record straight on the faulty premise of this hearing. That premise—that the AFT sought to keep schools closed longer than necessary and that we had inappropriate influence over the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s guidance for reopening schools—is patently false.

I also appreciate the opportunity to discuss the remarkable and heroic work that AFT members have done to teach the young people of our country during the COVID-19 crisis and to address the impact of the pandemic on America’s students and public schools.

The AFT is an education, healthcare and public service union. The members of my union do some of the most important work in society. We are early childhood educators, pre-K through 12th-grade teachers, paraprofessionals and other school personnel; higher education faculty and professional staff; federal, state and local government employees; and nurses, doctors and other healthcare professionals.

The AFT’s mission is and always has been to ensure a safe and welcoming school environment for all children and school staff, and to prepare students for life, college, career and citizenship. We know that young people learn and connect best in person, so opening schools safely—even during a pandemic—guided our actions, which I will describe in detail.

The AFT engages with virtually anyone who shows an interest in helping our members help our students succeed. That is why I readily and voluntarily agreed to testify before you today. Over many decades and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, that engagement has appropriately included the CDC. Any claim that the contact the AFT had with the CDC was unusual or inappropriate, particularly in reviewing its February 2021 Operational Strategy, is simply wrong.

We are asking you to help us help students recover from the effects of the pandemic—learning loss, trauma and sadness. The unrelenting attacks on teachers over pandemic-era school closings must end as well. Whether you do or do not support the public schools that 90 percent of America’s students attend, if you care about our young people, you should help educators help their students recover and thrive so they can seize their futures. This should not be an ideological or political divide.

Although education is crucial to our nation’s success, educators in this country have always been undervalued and underpaid. Long before COVID-19 brought the world to a grinding halt, educators faced challenging work environments: daunting workloads; inadequate support, resources and working conditions; subpar compensation often coupled with untenable student loan debt; a political climate that weaponizes education; the threat of gun violence; and a fundamental lack of professional respect. Indeed, even

prior to the pandemic, nearly 300,000 teachers were leaving the profession each year—two-thirds before retirement age—leaving a grave shortage of teachers and school staff.

Over the years, the AFT's ranks have included people whose names are surely familiar to you—John Dewey, Albert Einstein, Hubert Humphrey, Nobel Prize-winner Elie Wiesel, former Senate Majority Leader and Ambassador to Japan Mike Mansfield, former Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala and former United Nations Undersecretary and Nobel Prize-winner Ralph Bunche.

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Ruiz—indeed, most of the members of this Subcommittee—we have something in common. We represent people who live and work in your districts—you in Congress and the AFT in their workplaces. Chairman Wenstrup's constituents include teachers, nurses and other staff in the Cincinnati and Georgetown public schools, members of the Ohio Nurses Association, and faculty and staff at Cincinnati State Technical and Community College. Representative Ruiz, many teachers and staff who work in Southern California's public schools and community colleges live in your district. Members of this Subcommittee: my members and your constituents, as we sit here today, are making a difference in the lives of others.

Worst Public Health Crisis in a Century

COVID-19 dramatically disrupted and changed the lives of people in the United States and across the globe. Whether we got sick ourselves or lost a loved one, or lost a job, or had our lives and education disrupted, COVID-19 hurt us all.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the deadliest and most disruptive public health crisis in over a century. From January 3, 2020, until April 21 of this year, there have been 104,445,294 confirmed cases of [COVID-19](#) with 1,129,573 deaths in the United States. COVID-19 remains the third-leading [cause of death](#) in the United States, behind heart disease and cancer. Tragically, children were among those we have lost to COVID-19.

And, by October of 2022, at least 245,000 children and teens in the United States had been [orphaned](#) by COVID-19, according to Imperial College London—more than 1 out of every 360 boys and girls. Sixty-five percent of those who lost parents or caregivers belong to a racial or ethnic minority. The toll that has taken on our children, on our families, on the country—the lives upended, and the lives lost—is beyond comprehension.

Gabrielle Gayle was a fourth-grade special education teacher and union delegate in Queens, New York. Gabby and her husband were expecting their second child when she died of COVID-19.

We lost Zelene Blancas, a first-grade teacher in Socorro, Texas, whom you may have seen in a viral video offering her students the choice of a hug, handshake, high five or fist bump each day.

We lost Anthony Harrell, a school custodian in Norfolk, Virginia.

And Holly Ann Hoover, a school nurse in Volusia, Florida.

Julia Hidalgo, a paraprofessional in New York City.

Ray Amundson, a school bus driver in St. Francis, Minnesota.

And Mildred Fay Redcherries, a teacher in Lame Deer, Montana.

These are just a few of the [members of the AFT family we lost to COVID-19](#). The health and well-being of our members and the people they serve—students, parents, patients and families—has always been a huge concern for us. That was particularly true in this unprecedented pandemic. My union desperately needed a partner in the federal government to respond to this crisis. But in 2020, the first year of the pandemic, the Trump administration’s response was chaotic and reckless.

The Trump administration threw out the Obama administration’s pandemic playbook, consistent with President Trump’s contempt for knowledge and expertise in health and education matters more generally. There were shortages of pretty much everything necessary to protect Americans, including our frontline responders. You have undoubtedly seen the photos of nurses resorting to “protecting” themselves by wearing trash bags. With the strategic national stockpile *unstocked* as the pandemic surged, I and a handful of AFT staff scoured the globe for protective gear. Ultimately, we secured and purchased more than 50,000 face shields, 500,000 N95 respirators and more than 1 million surgical masks to protect our frontline members.

On top of a public health crisis, the country was facing an economic crisis caused by the pandemic. This highly transmissible virus shut down most of the American economy for the first time in our history. Millions of Americans lost their jobs. Small businesses were shuttered. Communities across the country were devastated. And then there were the children, at home in front of devices, not able to be with their friends, many mourning the loss of their parents and grandparents.

As COVID-19 raged across the country—infecting, killing and terrifying Americans—the AFT acted quickly by pursuing four main goals: first, safeguard the health and lives of students, families and frontline workers in education, healthcare and public service. Second, assess and advocate for the science-based measures needed to resume in-person schooling safely because of the vital importance of in-person schooling. Third, focus on

students' social, emotional and physical well-being and on recovering from learning loss. Fourth, secure the resources needed to do all this.

AFT members pursued those goals creatively and heroically. Even before vaccines were widely available in the spring of 2021, our members were on the frontlines. Bus drivers and food service workers scrambled to ensure families got “grab and go” meals. Social workers risked their own health to keep helping and protecting kids. Teachers, paraprofessionals and professors crafted innovative ways to help students learn, engage and connect. And, of course, nurses, EMTs, doctors and respiratory therapists put their health and lives on the line, often without adequate personal protective equipment. At our core, teachers and school personnel are problem-solvers. And when our nation needed them most, they displayed incredible grit, dedication, ingenuity and flexibility.

Educators asked repeatedly for two things—a safe workplace and the resources they and their students needed to succeed. We knew that safely returning students to in-person learning was vital for students' well-being, for families to function, and for the economy to recover. But often, because the Trump administration and others politicized safety and undermined science, we were working in a climate of chaos, fear and misinformation as the pandemic surged in wave after unpredictable wave. People like Beverly Scott, Kara McCormick-Lyons and Lisa Rogers, who are here with me today, represent the best of what our members did and continue to do in these fraught conditions.

Beverly Scott has been a nurse for almost 30 years, first in labor and delivery and intensive care and then, since 1999, as a school nurse in Cleveland's public schools.

School nurses have always helped children with an array of physical health needs, from administering EpiPens and other medications, to tending to stomach aches and sore throats. Since COVID-19, Beverly says, school nurses are overwhelmed tending to students' mental health needs. Students sometimes stop by just to talk or take a break.

Beverly loves being a school nurse. But she's burned out. So are most of her colleagues. If she had a magic wand, Beverly says there would be a nurse in every school. There would be mental health professionals. There'd be more dental programs. They'd have the vision program that the district cut, which always identified kids who needed glasses. These are basic necessities—for our children's health and so that they are ready to learn. These are the sorts of things worthy of congressional hearings and action. Not baseless attacks and allegations.

Kara McCormick-Lyons is a mom, a 25-year veteran teacher and the president of the White Plains Teachers' Association. Her husband, Michael, is also a teacher. Kara and Michael had to negotiate conducting two virtual classrooms in their home, while their daughters learned nearby.

Early in the pandemic, Kara's school community offered daily read-alouds for families, socially distanced visits to students' homes to drop off materials, and car parades for students to connect amid the isolation. In the spring of 2020, through a partnership between the AFT and First Book, Kara's union distributed 500,000 free books to the community. A \$50,000 AFT grant enabled Kara and her union to open food and clothing pantries for families suffering economic devastation.

To suggest that teachers wanted schools to stay closed a day longer than necessary is repugnant, Kara says. But the risks were real. In February 2021, while Kara's daughter was sick with COVID-19 and a dangerously high fever, Kara's mother died of COVID-19. Her husband Michael's co-teacher died of COVID-19 that same week. Tragedy upon tragedy.

Kara is immensely grateful for the funding from the American Rescue Plan to have adequate ventilation, proper PPE and other safety measures.

Lisa Rogers is a bus driver in the Albuquerque Public Schools and a leader in the Albuquerque Federation of Classified Professionals. During COVID-19, Lisa and other bus drivers and bus attendants delivered food to students so they wouldn't go hungry. They dropped off learning packets and school supplies, and their buses served as internet hotspots around the city to minimize disruptions to students' learning.

Once schools reopened for in-person learning, Lisa and her colleagues meticulously cleaned and sanitized their buses to keep students safe and healthy.

School transportation workers are among the unsung heroes who kept students safe, fed, connected and learning during the pandemic.

Thank you, Beverly, Kara and Lisa, for being here today.

The AFT Worked to Reopen Schools Safely

Our public schools are centers of the community. They're not just where kids learn academics; they are where they build relationships and become part of a larger community. Many children who might otherwise go hungry eat free breakfast and lunch at school. And many parents rely on public schools not only to educate their children, but to keep their children safe while they work.

Even before COVID-19, we knew that kids learn best in person, and that remote, hybrid and simultaneous instruction are not adequate substitutes. Being in school is essential to children's academic, social and emotional well-being. We know this not as a matter for study or the grist for a congressional investigation. We know this because we live it every day.

Our members told us repeatedly throughout the pandemic how important it was for kids to be in school with the right safety measures. Seventy-six percent of our education members said this in a June 2020 poll, and 80 percent told us this in a February 2021 poll.

We knew that the safety protocols we advocated for were not an obstacle to reopening schools, as some officials claimed at the time, including Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. Health and safety protocols were the pathway for students and staff to get back to school and stay in school and to create trust throughout the school community.

The pandemic exposed and exacerbated deep inequities in health, housing, economic well-being and education—including the systemic underfunding of inner-city, rural and tribal schools. Students, families and staff in schools with overcrowded classrooms, windows that don't open, and bathrooms without soap had understandable worries about the safety of their schools.

Polls in the first year of the pandemic showed that parents wanted safety measures in place before returning their children to in-person schooling. And polls today show that a large majority of parents believe that schools acted appropriately in pivoting to remote and hybrid learning and back to in-person learning.

Our efforts over the last three years to safely reopen schools—working with our members and with parents, communities and public health experts—provide a mountain of evidence that demonstrates our commitment to in-person learning. Much of that work is unknown to the general public. I suspect much of it is unknown to the members of this Subcommittee. It demonstrates why it made perfect sense for the CDC to speak with us among the more than 50 organizations they consulted as they were considering how to reopen schools. The Trump administration should have done this but did not.

Here is a summary of some of the actions the AFT took from the very beginning of the pandemic.

On February 4, 2020, as President [Trump minimized COVID-19's seriousness](#), I held a press conference with Association of Flight Attendants President Sara Nelson and others to [push for a coordinated response](#) to the emerging pandemic.

In April 2020—one month after the first pandemic closures—the AFT released a landmark [plan to safely reopen America's schools](#) and communities, months before many other groups, including the federal government. We developed our plan with health and education experts and with input from our members. As we learned more about COVID-19, our plan evolved in tandem with the science. We updated our plan twice to address the changing circumstances and developments in science.

On April 24, 2020, I wrote an op-ed with former Education Secretary John King [calling out the shortcomings of remote education](#) and advocating for multi-week summer school to deal with learning loss, which we identified long before it became part of the national dialogue.

In May 2020, I was appointed to New York State's Reimagine Education Advisory Council. And in September 2020, the council's recommendations became the centerpiece of Governor Andrew Cuomo's [school reopening policies](#)—policies that enabled virtually every school district in New York State to have safe in-person learning for the 2020-21 school year.

In July 2020, the AFT joined with the National Education Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the School Superintendents Association to commit to doing everything possible to safely resume in-person schooling at the start of the 2020-21 school year. Again, our agenda was the opposite of wanting to keep schools closed. It was to reopen them safely.

In January 2021, Rajiv Shah of the Rockefeller Foundation and I wrote an [op-ed arguing schools could reopen](#) with comprehensive COVID-19 testing before the vaccine was widely available. On February 5, I reiterated my position that vaccinations are a priority, not a prerequisite, for in-person learning.

On February 8, 2021, a *New York Times* article titled "[The Union Leader Who Says She Can Get Teachers Back in Schools](#)" accurately reported that I was calling for schools to reopen, in person, as soon as possible.

Later in February 2021, on NBC's "Meet the Press," I issued an [unambiguous call for in-person learning](#), arguing that if the NFL could resume in-person football games, schools could resume in-person classes. The key for the NFL was surveillance and diagnostic testing, which also enabled some private schools to reopen safely. For the record, [private schools](#) were just 4 percentage points more likely than public schools to stay open. Accordingly, I reiterated the call for testing for public schools.

In March 2021, I wrote an op-ed with Harlem Children's Zone leader Geoffrey Canada to underline "the need not just to [return to in-person learning, but to re-imagine learning beyond COVID-19](#)."

On March 24, 2021, *The Atlantic* published a piece on schools reopening, noting, accurately, that I "had been talking about [finding a way to resume face-to-face instruction](#) since a few weeks into the pandemic."

In May 2021, I gave a speech from AFT headquarters calling for [five-days-a-week reopening and pledging \\$5 million](#) for a back-to-school campaign to make it happen. The speech was reproduced in *The Atlantic*.

We reiterated that call in July 2021, at the AFT’s TEACH conference, urging our members to work to reopen schools that fall in person, five days a week, with mitigation measures; ventilation upgrades; and social, emotional and academic supports for students. And they did. The AFT’s \$5 million “Back to School for All” campaign supported affiliates in 30 states to do everything from school reopening fairs to vaccination clinics and members’ door-to-door visits to encourage families to return to in-person learning.

And this work was bipartisan. In July and August 2021, Republican pollster Frank Luntz surveyed parents on behalf of the de Beaumont Foundation. Luntz asked the AFT and others to participate. Parents’ highest priorities included getting all the safety precautions needed in schools, getting the most students vaccinated as possible, and maximizing the safety of students, teachers and school staff.

In August 2021, I told Chuck Todd on NBC’s “Meet the Press” that the [AFT was prepared to work with, not oppose, employers on vaccination mandates](#) to ensure schools stay open.

Our members met the moment when it came to vaccines. Just months after COVID-19 vaccines were widely available, 90 percent of AFT members were fully vaccinated to keep themselves, their families and their students safe.

In December 2021, a *New York Times* profile noted that “those who fault Weingarten for closed schools misunderstand the role she has played over the past 20 months. Rather than championing shutdowns, she’s spent much of her energy, both in public and behind the scenes, trying to get schools open.”

In January 2022, the *Washington Post* reported that I had been “delivering a message for months that [schools need to be open.](#)”

In January 2021, roughly half of school districts were virtual only. Over the course of the next month, infection rates dropped exponentially and governors began to let boards of education make decisions on reopening. Consequently, the reopening of schools accelerated between February and May. By the end of May, over 95 percent of schools were offering some form of in-person learning.

Throughout the first two years of the pandemic, the AFT conducted several clinics for our affiliate leaders on the safe reopening of schools. We worked with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, and other education and civil rights organizations to publish examples of best practices of equitable provision of education around digital access, school meals and support for students with disabilities, English learners and students experiencing homelessness.

The AFT convened video town halls with public health experts, parents’ groups and our members to disseminate accurate information, answer questions and create community.

We did town halls with President Trump’s Surgeon General Jerome Adams as well as Dr. Anthony Fauci. We did town halls with the National PTA and other parents’ groups, and with mental health experts such as Dr. Pamela Cantor. Our town halls drew tens of thousands of participants. We met via Zoom with parent groups that often disagreed with us on COVID-19 safety measures and school closures. One of those Zooms included Dr. Tracy Hoeg, one of the witnesses at your hearing last month, who was quite complimentary at the time about the work we were doing. We heard each other out and talked things through. We need more of that in America.

We did all this work... yet Chairman Wenstrup, you and this Subcommittee are focusing on a few sentences in the CDC’s 38-page Operational Strategy. Not the relentless efforts and numerous steps the AFT took to reopen schools safely. Or our members’ work to help young people recover from trauma, depression, fear, isolation and other effects of the pandemic, including learning loss.

We did this work as President Trump failed to produce a coherent school reopening plan.

We did this work as the Trump administration chalked up the worst record of any developed country in per-capita deaths from COVID-19.

We did this work as Education Secretary Betsy DeVos failed to *ever* offer guidance for a safe return to school, stating only that schools had to open.

We did this work as certain politicians sought to exploit the pandemic and blame the AFT for the way we responded to the COVID-19 crisis.

They ignored the science. They ignored that the safe reopening of schools sometimes involved negotiating with school employees, including the issues of COVID-19 testing, ventilation and vaccinations.

They deliberately distorted any attempt by teachers to implement safety measures as stalling tactics.

The AFT Kept Kids’ Safety First

In schools where best practices were in place—good ventilation, full vaccination, high-quality masks, regular COVID-19 testing, testing to stay in school after exposure, and a nurse in every school—it helped keep children, staff and families safe and students in school, in person. Vaccines were a game-changer. They enabled us to advocate for a safe off-ramp from universal masking, which we did in November 2021.

In New York City, the United Federation of Teachers joined medical experts, parents and community groups to push for surveillance testing. The UFT took the initiative to review

the [safety protocols](#) for the district's more than 1,400 schools. Ultimately, the union negotiated a landmark safety agreement that enabled the largest school district in the country to open for the 2020-21 school year.

Across the country, AFT affiliates engaged in similar bargaining. We had varying degrees of cooperation from school districts, but our goal never changed. Our fight for a safe reopening—and the resources needed to achieve it—was evident from the pandemic's earliest days.

The AFT Fought for Resources to Make Schools Safe and Thrive

The AFT fought for passage of the American Rescue Plan, which has been a lifeline to help Americans recover from the pandemic. We fought for funding for health and safety upgrades in schools. We fought for funding for tutoring programs and other proven approaches to address learning loss and accelerate learning. After a year of the botched response by President Trump and Education Secretary DeVos, President Biden operated completely differently. When President Trump left office, 46 percent of schools were open for in-person instruction. Between the passage of the American Rescue Plan and the work done by agencies, including the CDC, and by governors, education agencies, education officials, parents and educators including our union, we went from 46 percent of schools open for in-person instruction in January, 2021 to close to 97 percent open for in-person instruction in May, 2021.

[Every Republican in Congress](#) voted against the American Rescue Plan. I am pleased that some members of this Subcommittee now have embraced many provisions of the law.

America's educators have thrown themselves into helping students recover academically, socially and emotionally. We will do what we always do—identify students' strengths and weaknesses and adjust instruction to ensure our kids have the knowledge and skills they need for college, career and citizenship and to realize their dreams.

A lot has been said about learning loss. Learning loss varied widely from place to place since the start of the pandemic, but it happened nearly everywhere—in the United States and globally. Many factors had an impact on learning loss, with children in low-income families and those who attend high-poverty schools suffering the largest declines. But neither factor—poverty nor length of online learning—predicted drops in reading and math scores.

And, of course, test scores are just one indicator of academic learning—never mind overall development, well-being, and resilience.

Even the best test score snapshots we have, from the 450,000-student national sample of 4th- and 8th-graders who took NAEP reading and math tests from January to March 2022,

can't draw "a straight line between the time spent and remote learning, in and of itself, and student achievement," as commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics [Peggy Carr](#) said.

Take Los Angeles. Schools were closed for the entire academic year of 2020-21, yet reading scores on NAEP went up.

Like so many other districts, the Los Angeles Unified School District fed students and families during the pandemic—140 million meals worth. But they did much more. All LAUSD students got computers and internet access within weeks of schools closing. Students had access to academic tutoring and individualized support. Teachers and administrators worked together and with partners like local PBS stations to make online learning more engaging. They used federal funds to add reading specialists for the crucial early grades. The district and unions worked collaboratively so that when schools did open again, students, staff and families would feel as safe as possible. And they helped keep the community safe with widespread, cost-effective COVID-19 testing at school sites.

These actions were the right thing to do—for kids, families and school staff. The compelling question is what are we doing now and in the future to help our kids recover and thrive?

I recently laid out four components of a unified strategy that can help transform our public schools to help young people recover from learning loss, trauma and disconnection and to strengthen and transform public education. They include, in brief, a vast expansion of community schools with wraparound services; experiential learning for all kids, including career and technical education; the revival of the teaching profession; and deepened partnerships with parents and the community.

I want to expand on two of these components because, particularly as we help children recover from the effects of the pandemic, they are especially crucial. Community schools wrap academics, food assistance, health and dental care, mental health services and much more around public schools to transform them into hubs that connect families and students with supports they need to learn and live.

Last month, I went back to [Wolfe Street Academy](#), a community school in Baltimore, to see how they were doing.

Ninety-six percent of the students there qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch. Since converting to a community school nearly 20 years ago, Wolfe Street has gone from the 77th-most successful elementary school in Baltimore (out of 80) to the second-most successful. And, like other community schools, when COVID-19 hit, it was a matter of ramping up services, not having to start from scratch.

Students have access to medical checkups, clothing and mental health services. Families have food assistance, language support and legal aid.

And this school is fun! Wolfe Street offers a wide variety of after-school programs, including chess club, robotics club, Mexican folkloric dance, orchestra, a soccer league and more. And, by the way, Wolfe Street is a unionized public charter school.

Experiential learning embeds the things that make kids want to be in school, deeply engaging them in what they're learning and letting them experience the camaraderie and responsibility of working together on a team. In the age of AI and chatGPT, this type of learning is crucial to being able to think and write, solve problems, apply knowledge and discern fact from fiction.

Experiential learning has long been embedded in career and technical education programs where students use their minds and their hands to learn everything from auto repair to nursing, IT, graphic design, welding, culinary skills and hospitality. CTE students learn skills that give them a head start when they go to college or start their careers. Shouldn't every student have that opportunity?

It's also a proven strategy. Ninety-four percent of young people who [concentrate in CTE](#) graduate from high school, and 72 percent of them go on to college.

We have crucial work to do—work that would be much easier without constant rancor and attacks. Most Americans disapprove of the culture wars that have saturated education policy and instead want political leaders to prioritize what kids need to succeed in school. Nevertheless, the unrelenting attacks by extremist politicians—that are intended to sow distrust with the parents of our students—have undermined teachers and our public school system. America's adversaries around the globe no doubt look at this ongoing spectacle and the undermining of our system of public education... and applaud.

The CDC's Consultation with the AFT on Its Operational Strategy

Finally, to the announced purpose of today's hearing—the CDC's consultation with me and the AFT on the CDC's February 12, 2021, "Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools Through Phased Mitigation." The first paragraph of the Operational Strategy's Executive Summary succinctly described its goal as follows:

As communities plan safe delivery of in-person instruction in K-12 schools, it is essential to decide when and under what conditions to help protect students, teachers, and staff and slow the spread of SARSCoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. It is critical for schools to open as safely and as soon as possible, and remain open, to achieve the benefits of in-person learning and key support services.

Thus, the core purpose of the Operational Strategy was to outline a strategy "for **schools to open as safely and as soon as possible, and remain open.**" Thus, the central importance of in-person learning was clearly stated in the Operational Strategy's opening sentences.

With a strategy focused on opening schools, it was completely fitting and proper for the CDC, which specializes in science, not education, to consult with education groups. The CDC conferred with more than 50 organizations about the guidance, according to Dr. Walensky. Not surprisingly, the CDC would want to consult with the leadership of the country's largest teachers union to consider our insights, expertise and suggestions on a strategy that would directly affect our membership in matters of life and death. AFT leadership was keenly aware of the hopes and fears of our members, whose trust and acceptance were necessary for the success of any operational strategy. Indeed, the failure of the CDC to share its thinking with—and solicit comments from—the largest unions representing teachers and school staff would have been governmental malpractice of the highest order.

Last week, we submitted a detailed letter from our outside counsel that refuted the allegations contained in this Subcommittee's March 28, 2023, letter to me. I have attached a copy of that letter to this prepared statement. In this prepared statement, I will provide only a brief summary of that refutation. First, the March 28 letter to me from the Subcommittee alleged that we had an opportunity to "edit" the Operational Strategy prior to its release. To be clear, we were provided a copy of the draft Operational Strategy so that we could provide comments based on the lived experience of our members. We did so. We did not draft the document, and we did not substantially revise the document. Nor did we have any ability to control whether the CDC would accept or reject the limited suggestions we made.

The first of the two AFT suggestions accepted in substance by the CDC related to the responsibility of schools to provide options, including possible reassignment or remote work, for staff who had high-risk conditions or who were at high risk for severe illness or death as a result of COVID-19. In other words, it urged schools to show flexibility to those Americans who were demonstrably at high risk. This suggestion, merged into a single paragraph of the Operational Strategy, was to try to avoid unnecessary illness or death and allow teachers to continue doing their job. It is hard to understand how any reasonable and humane person would oppose this suggestion.

The second of the two AFT suggestions accepted in substance by the CDC was that in the event a new virulent strain of the virus appeared in the United States, the Operational Strategy might need to be revised. This seemingly uncontroversial suggestion to adjust to changed conditions was mentioned in passing in the Executive Summary and in a single sentence in the body of the Organizational Strategy.

These two suggestions accepted in part by the CDC are the basis for the wild allegations made in the March 28 letter that the AFT and I are responsible for the terrible setbacks, learning losses and other harms suffered by our children during the period many schools were closed. While the CDC has no authority to open or close schools, our members, parents, administrators and public health officials needed clear, science-based guidance

they could trust and rely on that could keep students and staff safe in in-person learning. That is what we fought for and did everywhere with whoever was willing to engage with us—whether school superintendents, school boards, governors, the Trump administration, the Biden administration, the World Health Organization, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or others.

It is offensive to suggest, as your letter does, that our agenda was otherwise—to keep schools closed. We are schoolteachers, school nurses and school-related personnel. We teach children, and we believe kids need to be in school. In school buildings. And it is even more offensive to suggest that our views at any time were shaped by considerations other than our profound desire and duty to protect children and their educators from the ravages of COVID-19.

Conclusion

Our country has been through a crucible. Our public schools, attended by 90 percent of America's children, are key to the recovery of our young people, our communities, our economy and our country.

Help us. Think bigger than the faulty premise of this inquiry. We can reimagine public schooling in America so that all our kids not only recover but thrive. Help us help America's children. That should not be an ideological divide between Republicans and Democrats. That's why I am testifying. Let's bridge these divides. America's kids and teachers have been through enough.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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The Honorable Brad R. Wenstrup
Chairman
Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic
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The Honorable Raul Ruiz
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Dear Chairman Wenstrup and Ranking Member Ruiz:

On behalf of the American Federation of Teachers (“AFT”), and in advance of the hearing of the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic (the “Subcommittee”) scheduled for April 26, we submit this letter to address the false and misleading claims contained in the Subcommittee’s March 28, 2023, letter to the AFT (the “March 28 Letter”). Those claims regard the AFT’s involvement in the development of the “Operational Strategy for K-12 through Phased Mitigation,” dated February 12, 2021 (the “Operational Strategy”) issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (“CDC”).

For the past two years, Republican members of this Subcommittee – first when they were in the Minority and now when they are in the Majority – have been targeting the AFT for its participation in the development of the Operational Strategy. The AFT’s role has been exaggerated and falsified to support pre-conceived conclusions that the Operational Strategy was subject to undue and inappropriate outside influence.

Though the facts have not supported those pre-conceived conclusions, that has not deterred the Majority from continuing to make the same false and misleading allegations. In fact, the AFT's role in the development of the Operational Strategy was limited and wholly appropriate given its representation of 1.7 million members working in the very schools the Operational Strategy was intended to open and keep open. This letter sets forth the various allegations made by the Majority, in various forms, since May 2021 and demonstrates that they are gross distortions of the facts.

I. The Role Played by the AFT During the Pandemic

Although education is critical to our nation's success and future, educators in this country have always been undervalued and underpaid. Long before COVID-19 brought the world to a grinding halt, educators faced challenging work environments: among other things, a daunting workload; inadequate support, resources, and working conditions; subpar compensation often coupled with untenable student loan debt; a political climate that weaponizes education; the threat of gun violence; and a fundamental lack of professional respect. Indeed, even prior to the pandemic, nearly 300,000 teachers were leaving the profession each year – two-thirds before the retirement age – leading to a grave shortage of teachers and school staff.¹

COVID-19 changed life for everyone, and led to unimaginable death and destruction, including crippling disruption of our education system. Although the pandemic did not create many of the problems experienced by educators, for many, it exacerbated them to a point that was unsustainable. Between 2020 and 2022, the rate of job dissatisfaction among preK-12 teachers rose 34 points, and one poll found that 75% of teachers would no longer recommend the teaching profession to young people today.²

From the earliest days of the pandemic, the AFT was at the forefront of developing strategies to safely reopen schools and not, as so often has been falsely alleged, keep them closed. In April 2020, it released a school reopening plan developed

¹ American Federation of Teachers, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow? What Americas Must Do to Attract and Retain the Educators and School Staff Our Students Need*, Report from the AFT Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force (2022), available at <https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/media/2022/taskforcereport0722.pdf>.

² American Federation of Teachers & Hart Research Associates, *Under Siege: The Outlook of AFT Members* (2022), available at https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/media/2022/de-14326_aft_member_survey.pdf.

in conjunction with health and education experts and AFT members.³ A few months later, in July 2020, the union joined with the National Education Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the School Superintendents Association to push for the resumption of in-person schooling at the start of the 2020-2021 school year.⁴ Consistent with this, the AFT launched a new blueprint to reopen schools in November 2020.⁵ And these efforts continued after the CDC released the Operational Strategy in February 2021. For example, in May 2021, the AFT invested \$5 million in a “Back to School for Everyone” national campaign to assist in reopening schools across the country.⁶

To be clear, the AFT has always recognized that children learn best in person, and the safe reopening of schools was one of the AFT’s top priorities from the pandemic’s inception. It is against this backdrop that beginning in late January 2021, the AFT proposed a handful of modest changes to the Operational Strategy with the goal, among other things, of allowing educators to continue to do their jobs safely in order to reopen schools – not keep them closed. Moreover, the allegations that the Operational Strategy served to keep schools closed ignores the fundamental fact that the CDC has no legal authority of any kind to open or close schools. The CDC does not govern or regulate schools; its role is limited to providing public health-related guidance. The responsibility for opening and closing schools lies, depending on the jurisdiction, with states, school superintendents and/or school boards.

II. The Effort to Scapegoat the AFT for the CDC’s Operational Strategy

A. The Scalise Letter

In May 2021, Steve Scalise, the then-ranking member of the Subcommittee, sent a letter to Dr. Rochelle Walensky of the CDC making a number of allegations about the CDC. Then-Ranking Member Scalise alleged that the AFT “apparently pressur[ed] the CDC to amend its school reopening guidance to exclude full reopening of classrooms,” and that President Biden “bowed down to the bosses at the AFT rather than standing up

³ American Federation of Teachers, *A Plan to Safely Reopen America’s Schools and Communities* (2020), available at https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/media/2020/covid19_reopen-america-schools.pdf.

⁴ American Federation of Teachers, *Pediatricians, Educators and Superintendents Urge a Safe Return to School This Fall* (2020), available at <https://www.aft.org/press-release/pediatricians-educators-and-superintendents-urge-safe-return-school-fall>.

⁵ Randi Weingarten, *A blueprint to safely open schools*, *The Hill* (2020), <https://thehill.com/opinion/education/528004-a-blueprint-to-safely-open-schools/>.

⁶ American Federation of Teachers, *Back to School for All: Return, Recover and Reimagine* (2021), available at <https://www.aft.org/column/back-school-all-return-recover-and-reimagine>.

for what is best for young students.” Not satisfied with these false assertions, Mr. Scalise suggested in his letter that perhaps the Operational Strategy was not the CDC’s at all, and indeed may have been written by the AFT.⁷

The Scalise letter went on to state, contrary to fact, that the AFT does not consider in-person learning to be critical for children, and that the CDC’s draft guidance would have allowed more schools to reopen before “the AFT was able to successfully bully the public health experts at the CDC into politicizing the guidance.”⁸

The false and misleading allegations and summary conclusions presented in the Scalise letter were based primarily on news accounts, although several were supposedly based on tweets posted by Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona.⁹ In fact, the tweets of Secretary Cardona support nothing of the kind.

B. The March 2022 Staff Report

On March 30, 2022, the then-Minority of the Subcommittee issued an 11-page Staff Report further advancing the false narrative that the AFT had played a central role in drafting the Operational Strategy. While Ranking Member Scalise had only suggested the possibility that the AFT might have written the entire Operational Strategy, the Staff Report went a major step further in its very title: “Interim Findings: Union Officials Wrote Key Portions of the Biden Administration’s School Reopening Guidance.” The 11-page Staff Report supported no such conclusion.

The Staff Report made similar false and misleading allegations to those in Mr. Scalise’s letter. It alleged, inaccurately, that the AFT has no scientific expertise. Through selective quotations of a CDC witness, it claimed that CDC’s consultation with the AFT in finalizing its Operational Strategy was “uncommon,” and that the CDC staff

⁷ See Letter from Hon. Steve Scalise, Ranking Member, Select Subcomm. on the Coronavirus Crisis, H. Comm. on Oversight & Reform, et. al., to Dr. Rochelle Walensky, Dir., Cents. for Disease Control and Prevention (May 11, 2021), at 2, available at <https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Letter-to-CDC-Re.-Union-Interference-051121.pdf> (“[M]any local jurisdictions refuse to fully re-open, citing the CDC guidance as a crutch. We now know this guidance, was influenced, and possibly even written by, the AFT.”).

⁸ See *id.* at 3.

⁹ See *id.* at 2-3 nn. 14-17. Although the Scalise letter cites Dr. Cardona’s tweets as the source for the crux of its allegations against the AFT, the actual source for these statements appears to be a New York Post article. See, Jon Levine, *Powerful teachers union influenced CDC on school reopenings, emails show*, N.Y. Post (May 1, 2021), <https://nypost.com/2021/05/01/teachers-union-collaborated-with-cdc-on-school-reopening-emails/>.

“indicated a willingness to accept near verbatim edits to the Operational Strategy,” positioning the union “to impose line-by-line edits to the Operational Strategy **on at least two separate occasions.**”¹⁰

The last phrase gives away the game: it undermined both the title of the Staff Report and its thrust. In fact, in a 38-page document, the CDC appears to have accepted only two changes to the Operational Strategy proposed by the AFT. The first change was to encourage schools and school districts to provide options for teachers and staff who had documented high-risk conditions – such as being immuno-compromised – or who were at increased risk for severe illness or death if they contracted the virus. Those options included potential reassignment, telework, modified job responsibilities, or scheduling flexibility, among others. And the AFT suggested, and the CDC agreed, that those options should be formulated in consultation with occupational medicine and human resource professionals. It is truly difficult to understand the substantive objections to this change.

The second change suggested by the AFT should, if anything, have been even less controversial than the first. It was to add common-sense language that in the event a new variant of the coronavirus had substantially elevated transmission rates, the guidance might need to be revised. It is difficult to imagine a credible argument against noting the potential need to update guidance based on changed circumstances.

It turns out that the Staff Report’s complaint was not the specifics of the two modest changes proposed by the AFT, but that it had, according to the Staff Report, nefariously conspired with the CDC to commit an egregious process foul. Despite not being education experts, the CDC was apparently supposed to develop guidance about how best to reopen schools and keep them open without consulting with groups, including the AFT, which had the very expertise in education and schools that the CDC lacked.

The Staff Report’s claim, repeated in the March 28 Letter, was that the AFT was given “uncommon” access to the CDC, despite the CDC Director’s own insistence to the contrary. The claim appears to be based on statements made during the Subcommittee’s February 18, 2022, interview with CDC employee Dr. Henry Walke. Dr. Walke's testimony is quoted extensively in the Staff Report and is the cornerstone of the assertion that the AFT’s access was “uncommon.” But the cherry-picked statements

¹⁰ Staff Report, Select Subcomm. on the Coronavirus Crisis (Minority), 117th Cong., Interim Findings: Union Officials Wrote Key Portions of the Biden Administration’s School Reopening Guidance (Mar. 30, 2022) at 2, 3, 5, available at <https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/AFT-CDC-Interference-Interim-Report-3-30-2022.pdf> (emphasis added).

from Dr. Walke's interview contained in the Staff Report ignore other important statements he made during the interview. In particular, in response to a question about whether it is common for the CDC to work with outside groups on their guidance, Dr. Walke stated:

It's common to have—to try to get input from our stakeholders around what their concerns are. So, you know, whether it's the worker safety, or occupational health, or hospital infections. So it's common to reach out to our partners in these particular areas, and try to understand what their concerns are.¹¹

As important, Dr. Walke also acknowledged that there are instances where line-by-line edits, despite being uncommon, would be appropriate under the circumstances because the CDC's ultimate goal in releasing guidance is to provide clarity and to be helpful to the American public.¹² That purpose was well-served by sharing a draft of the Operational Strategy with the AFT and evaluating its suggestions.

C. The March 28, 2023 Letter and the April 26 Hearing

The premise for the upcoming April 26 hearing, as articulated in the March 28 Letter, is the following:

The Select Subcommittee's previous investigation into this matter uncovered that CDC deviated from standard practice. You and the AFT were granted "uncommon" access to revise and edit an internal draft of the Operational Strategy at least two weeks prior to its release, even making line-by-line additions. The AFT's input and access coincidentally shifted CDC's guidance to align with AFT's agenda—keeping schools closed.

As should be apparent, this unproven premise was based largely on the Staff Report discussed above. The facts are as follows.

First, from the beginning of the pandemic, one of the AFT's top priorities was the safe reopening of schools. The claim that the AFT's agenda was "keeping schools

¹¹ Interview by Select Subcomm. on the Coronavirus Crisis, H. Comm. on Oversight & Reform with Dr. Henry Walke, Dir., Cents. for Disease Control & Prevention Off. of Readiness and Response (Feb. 18, 2022), 53:1283-89.

¹² *Id.* at 83:2037-55.

closed,” and that it shifted CDC’s guidance to match that agenda, is utterly false. Indeed, the public record from virtually the beginning of the pandemic is replete with examples showing the efforts of Ms. Weingarten and the AFT to reopen schools safely.

Second, the suggestion that the AFT played a major role in revising and editing the Operational Strategy is wildly exaggerated. In fact, the AFT’s role was extremely limited. It proposed changes that amounted to a few sentences in a 38-page document. The need to clarify these points was obvious and should have been uncontroversial.

Third, although we do not know the range of practices the CDC employs for consulting outside entities when developing a strategy, the Subcommittee has apparently learned that the CDC sought the input of at least the 14 other health and education organizations who have been sent letters as part of this Subcommittee’s investigation.¹³ In the context of developing a strategy that was explicitly aimed at schools, it would have been reckless and irresponsible – indeed, malpractice – for the CDC not to have consulted with stakeholders, including but not limited to the AFT, representing teachers, school administrators, and students and parents throughout the country, and taken their concerns and suggestions seriously. And even if the CDC would in fact have “deviated from standard practice” in making such consultations in order to responsibly address the complicated and fraught issue of safely and responsibly reopening schools in the midst of an unprecedented – and unpredictable – global pandemic, in fact such consultations are part of the CDC’s standard practice. The Subcommittee has only been able to reach the opposite conclusion by mischaracterizing evidence it previously obtained when it was in the House Minority.

III. The AFT’s Actual Role in the CDC’s Development of the Operational Strategy

The story of the AFT’s involvement in the Operational Strategy is simple and straightforward. On Friday January 29, 2021, Ms. Weingarten and senior AFT staff participated in a conference call with members of the CDC, including Dr. Walensky,

¹³ The recipients of these letters included: National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Association of School Nurses, National Association of State Boards of Education, National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Education Association, National School Boards Association, National Governors Association, National Association of County and City Health Officials, National Parent Teacher Association, Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists, Council of Chief State School Officers, The Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, Association of Public Health Laboratories, and AASA, The School Superintendents Association. In addition, Director Walensky has publicly stated that the CDC consulted with over 50 outside organizations regarding the Operational Strategy. See Joe Nocera, *CDC Still Getting Interference. This Time From Teachers*, Bloomberg (May 4, 2021), available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-05-04/cdc-emails-with-teachers-union-show-politics-still-trump-science?leadSource=uverify%20wall>.

and the Executive Office of the President (“EOP”). The purpose of the call was for the AFT to share its views on the draft Operational Strategy based on concerns of its members – the people who were teaching and supporting children in schools all over the country. In advance of the call, a senior AFT staff member prepared a list of member concerns to address, including robust testing, physical distancing, masking, accommodations for high-risk educators and staff, an objective science-based closure/reopen metric, and the formation of a stakeholder committee to oversee reopening. None of these items were particularly controversial, and many – with the exception of the accommodation language for high-risk staff – were already included in the CDC’s draft guidance. During the call, the AFT promised to send the CDC proposed language to consider related to accommodations for high-risk educators and staff, which a senior AFT staff member sent to the CDC on February 1, 2021.

Though the Operational Strategy did not contain accommodation language for educators and staff prior to the AFT’s suggestion, several points about the language are noteworthy. First, the Operational Strategy already contained language recognizing the need to accommodate high-risk students (or those who live with high-risk individuals) by giving them the option of virtual instruction. Suggesting that AFT’s members be given the same consideration was a logical and reasonable corollary of that point. Second, although the March 28 Letter falsely asserts that the AFT’s proposed revisions were designed to keep schools closed, in reality, the accommodation language was intended to do just the opposite: to permit schools to reopen by allowing high-risk educators to safely do their jobs in a manner that reduced their risk of severe illness or death.

Beyond the accommodation language and a handful of other concerns discussed orally with the CDC, the AFT also proposed, as noted above, a single sentence making the obvious and unexceptionable point that the strategy might need to be revised in the event of new variants. Specifically, on February 11, 2021, an AFT employee sent an email to CDC and EOP personnel suggesting that the CDC consider adding the following sentence: “In the event high-community transmission results from a new variant of SARS-CoV-2, a new update of these guidelines may be necessary.” Ultimately, the CDC included broader language than the AFT proposed, which stated that the guidance may need to be updated in “the event of increased levels of community transmission.” This complemented language already in the Operational Strategy which stated that mitigation strategies and school guidance might need to be adjusted as more information became available. This proposal was simply about following the science and the virus. Variants were already in existence, and the AFT’s members wanted strategies to be updated based on the science, and appropriate mitigation strategies to ensure that schools remained open and safe.

The more telling refutation to the implication that the CDC was the AFT's pawn in this process is that this February 11, 2021 email contained AFT suggestions that were rejected by the CDC. Specifically, the AFT proposed that a closure threshold – a “trigger” – be added to provide an objective standard for determining when a school should be closed based on positive test cases. This threshold was not adopted by the CDC. Thus, although the AFT was given a chance to convey its members concerns to the CDC in the unprecedented situation caused by the pandemic, any insinuation that the AFT had undue influence over the CDC or that the CDC blindly accepted the AFT's suggestions for the Operational Strategy is entirely false.

IV. The CDC's Consultation with Outside Entities

While we are unfamiliar with the CDC's standard practice for consulting with third parties on its public guidance, we believe that the narrowly tailored consultation here was wholly appropriate under the circumstances. The AFT is comprised of 1.7 million teachers, nurses, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, other school staff and education professionals. Simply put, the trust and confidence of these and other educators like them was essential to reopening schools. Releasing guidance on how to safely reopen schools without attempting to address the concerns of these educators would not only be irresponsible but also futile. It would be analogous to the Federal Aviation Administration not consulting with industry representatives on air safety regulations and guidelines, or energy regulators not consulting with representatives of the oil and gas industry in formulating new drilling regulations. In short, the failure to consult would have been foolish and self-defeating.

* * *

Teachers and staff work in our schools day in and day out. If they lacked confidence that public health guidance was workable and would keep them, their students, and their families safe, they would not have trusted the guidance, and efforts to open schools without adequate safeguards would have failed. Reasonable guidance, accepted as appropriately valuing – and providing for – the safety of teachers, staff, and students was the path to opening schools and keeping them open. The AFT was proud to assist the CDC, in a small way, to achieve that goal.

It is undeniable that the pandemic resulted in tragic and continuing consequences for children. Those consequences include learning loss, an increase in serious mental health issues among children, and an increase in certain physical health issues. They demand our sustained energy and attention. We make no progress towards addressing those very real problems by engaging in the type of scapegoating

built on false allegations that appear to be the basis for this Subcommittee's "investigation."

Ms. Weingarten looks forward to providing this Subcommittee with further evidence and facts when she appears before you on April 26.

Sincerely,



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