

'Back to school' like never before

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"Back to school" has never looked like this. Classes in three-quarters of the 100 largest school districts are entirely online, even though more than 16 million students in the United States lack internet access. Parents are struggling to help their children learn and also do their own jobs, while some families with means are forming learning pods. People who used to laud virtual charter schools, even Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, now champion in-school instruction. President Donald Trump occasionally tweets "OPEN THE SCHOOLS!!!" But he has put less effort into helping schools get the funding and support to reopen safely than he's put into those tweets. To date, 6.7 million Americans have been infected with COVID-19, 500,000 of whom are children, and nearly 200,000 Americans have died. It is unconscionable to pit life against learning in this way.

Trump's response to the coronavirus has been chaotic, contradictory and inept. Without federal guidance or funding, we've seen a patchwork of school reopening plans. Teachers unions throughout the country have reached creative and innovative agreements to meet the instructional and safety challenges. But in Florida, Georgia, Indiana and elsewhere, many schools had to close days after they reopened, after outbreaks of COVID-19. Now, like nursing homes and meatpacking plants early in the pandemic, college campuses are COVID-19 hotspots.

Trump has failed us. He lied about the coronavirus instead of working to contain it. He politicized the wearing of lifesaving masks. He said kids don't get COVID-19, and that it would disappear. He admits that he deliberately downplayed its risks to prevent "panic." Now, because he and DeVos have done nothing to plan and provide resources to reopen schools safely, many families are, indeed, panicking. Kids not being in school is hard for everyone. But it is a crisis for many families—for essential workers and others who can't stay home, children with disabilities, vulnerable families and those without the necessary technology. The only guidance DeVos has issued for this year is to mandate standardized high-stakes tests. How is it that kids' and teachers' health is dispensable, but high-stakes testing is not?

Despite this chaos and disruption, parents and educators view going back to school similarly. The AFT, the NAACP, the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools and the League of

United Latin American Citizens commissioned a new poll that found majorities of both parents and teachers believe protecting the health of students and staff should be the primary factor in weighing whether, how and when schools should open their doors for in-person instruction. Majorities of both parents and teachers are not comfortable

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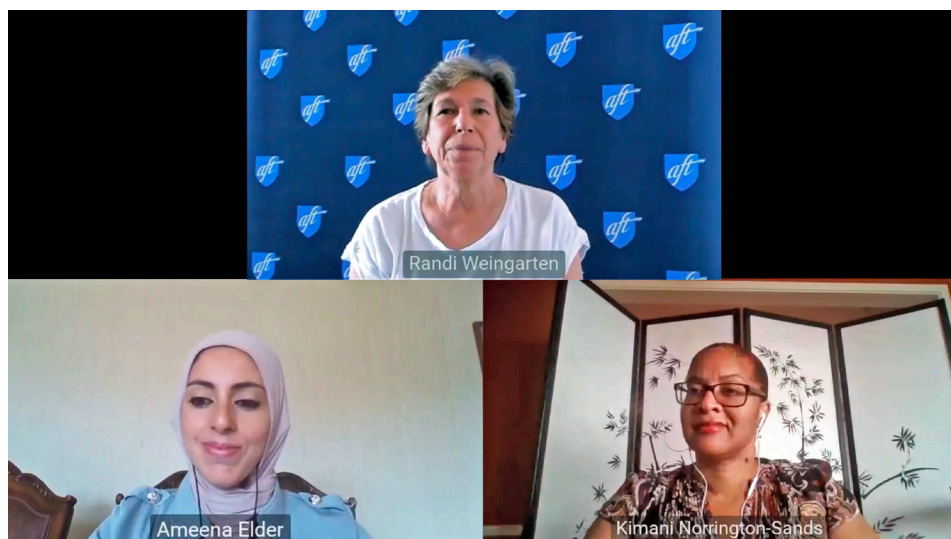
starting the school year in-person, and they worry that their districts will reopen schools too quickly, risking the safety of students, families and school staff. But when safety precautions such as masks, hand washing, daily deep cleaning, physical distancing and proper ventilation, and the funding to do all this, are in place—which the AFT has been fighting for since April—71 percent of parents and 79 percent of teachers are comfortable returning to school.

Those precautions are not in place in many schools. In Florida, the governor ordered all schools to reopen for in-person instruction, even as coronavirus hotspots flare in the state and infections among school-age children have jumped 34 percent. In response, the AFT and the Florida Education Association sued to allow remote instruction until community transmission is lowered and health and safety provisions are in place. In Texas, state officials are reporting coronavi-

rus infections only at the district level, often with delays; to address this, the Texas AFT launched an online tool so teachers and others can track confirmed cases at individual school sites.

The AFT and our affiliates have been working to reopen schools safely since they closed last March. The AFT released our initial "Plan to Safely Reopen Schools" in April and updated guidance in August. The United Federation of Teachers, our New York City affiliate, engaged independent medical and public health experts to develop a 50-item plan for the health and safety standards schools must meet before they open. And it negotiated a new reopening schedule to give additional time to ensure New York City schools are safe. The Boston Teachers Union just reached an agreement with the district that includes increased testing for school staff, independent air-quality tests in school buildings, more training on remote learning, and verification of health and safety measures before schools will be cleared to reopen. And we are working with Congress and telecommunications companies to connect more students and households—through internet service, computers, modems and Wi-Fi hotspots.

Teachers are working harder than ever to make both remote and in-person teaching and learning effective, engaging and equitable. We know that in-person learning and interactions are best for students, so we'll keep fighting for the resources and health protocols necessary to return to school as quickly and safely as possible.



Weingarten, top, and participants in the AFT's "Teaching in the Time of COVID-19" webinar.

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