

A safe and welcoming school year for all

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Readers of a certain age will get it when I say that teachers absolutely MacGyvered the last 16 months. For everyone else, I'm referring to the ways educators improvised using what they had on hand, and their ingenuity, to complete their mission—educating and connecting with their students during a once-in-a-century pandemic.

Educators have been the first responders to students' needs—troubleshooting technological problems; tending to students' emotional needs; and helping them through the hurdles of online, hybrid and in-person learning. And that can take a toll.

In a recent survey, 78 percent of teachers reported frequent job-related stress—almost twice as many as most other working adults during the pandemic. And teachers were nearly three times as likely to experience symptoms of depression as the general adult population.

Educators have just been through the second-most challenging year of their professional lives. What's the most challenging year? The one that starts this fall. Students will return to school with enormous needs. There still won't be enough school counselors, psychologists or nurses. Far too many schools still need safety improvements. And there will be enormous pressure to make up for lost time.

But educators are preparing to be back in school in person, full time—because they know that's what students need.

There are continued risks, particularly from the delta variant, which is causing alarming increases in infections in places with low vaccination rates.

Yet schools can fully reopen this fall in person—with ventilation upgrades; social, emotional and academic supports for students; and the resources needed to do all this. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued new guidance this week detailing mitigation measures schools should employ, recognizing that not everyone has been vaccinated.

With funding from the coronavirus rescue package and the American Rescue Plan, communities throughout the country are making schools safer. Last month, I visited the Martin Luther King Jr. Educational Campus in New York City with United Federation of Teachers President Michael Mulgrew. We fought for years to get the ventilation system at MLK fixed. Now, with federal funds and help from outside experts the UFT brought in, the city has fixed it, and students and staff at MLK can finally breathe healthy air. As an asthmatic, I felt it immediately.

But some families still have reservations.

People whose loved ones have gotten sick or died from COVID-19 may have heightened fears about sending their children to school. Families may be skeptical that safety precautions will be in place.

If the bathrooms at their child's school lacked soap before the pandemic or the ventilation was poor, it's an even greater concern now. Their children may be too young or unable to be vaccinated. And some people worry about the safety of vaccines.

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Some concerns have nothing to do with COVID-19. Parents whose children have been bullied; have experienced racism, antisemitism or anti-Asian bigotry; or have not been well-served academically, may see remote learning as a refuge.

These are all barriers we must overcome. The AFT is dedicating \$5 million to a Back to School for All campaign, with members reaching out to families to stress the importance of in-school learning and build families' trust and confidence in their children returning to school.

The AFT has already made more than 40 grants to state and local unions totaling more than \$3 million, covering 1,400 AFT local unions in 22 states. From small towns like Willmar, Minn., to

cities like Chicago, Los Angeles and New York, educators are stepping up.

AFT members in Cincinnati, Pittsburgh and St. Louis, and throughout Massachusetts, are going door to door, visiting students' homes to talk about the health and safety and education programs in place, to encourage families to send their children back for in-person learning.

In some places, our unions are working to increase vaccination rates. Others are contacting families whose children had limited or no attendance last year. All have the goal of "back to school for all."

As much as we want to feel "normal" again, we can do better than the old normal of test-based accountability systems and vast inequality. As we return to full-time in-person schooling, we have a unique opportunity to pursue new initiatives to help all kids thrive.

Reading really matters. That's why the AFT is redoubling our work to help educators improve their instruction in research-based literacy, whatever their subject or grade level—with an emphasis on under-resourced schools. And we are working to expand community schools to connect students and families to vital services right in the school.

When students return to school this fall, they will bring with them the scars of a long struggle we wish they hadn't had to endure, and educators will help them recover and feel safe and welcome. But students will also bring with them their hopes and their potential. And teachers will get back to what brought them to this hope-filled profession—helping their students not only dream their dreams but achieve them.



Students in Carle Place, N.Y., share what they learned about owls with Weingarten, foreground, on May 4.

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