

Safety, not recklessness, must drive school reopening

Randi Weingarten, President
American Federation of Teachers

Teachers want to get back to their classrooms with their students. We know the limits of remote instruction and the harm of prolonged isolation for students. We know that children best connect, learn and thrive when they're in school in person, and that public schools feed 30 million kids a day, in normal times. In June, 76 percent of AFT members polled said they were comfortable returning to school if public health safeguards like spacing, personal protective equipment, deep cleaning and ventilation were in place. We are not waiting for a vaccine. But, as coronavirus cases surge, we are insisting that officials not reopen school buildings without appropriate conditions and protections in place.

Reopening America's 98,000 public school buildings doesn't happen with an all-caps tweet or an ultimatum from the president. Instead of offering guidance or support to reopen schools safely, the Trump administration's stance is that science and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention should not "stand in the way" of reopening schools. That is reckless and wrong. Science gives us the tools to open schools; the CDC is our blueprint.

Unlike Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, the AFT has been planning for a return to school since school buildings closed in March. In April, we issued our "Plan to Safely Reopen America's Schools and Communities," which is based on science and public health protocols as well as educator and healthcare expertise—not on politics or wishful thinking.

Our plan details three conditions essential for schools to reopen. First, the average daily community infection rate among those tested for the coronavirus must be very low. (New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo has required the rate not to exceed 5 percent for at least 14 days.) Second, schools must employ public health protocols, including 6-foot social distancing, masks, deep cleaning and handwashing stations. Third, adequate resources must be available to enact these safeguards, including funding for additional nurses, guidance counselors and teachers to reduce class size.

But as the United States shatters records for new coronavirus cases, and Congress fails to provide the resources necessary to put back-to-school plans and safeguards in place, there are enormous hurdles to returning to school buildings safely in the next few weeks. That's why school districts like those in Los Angeles, San

Diego, Atlanta, Palm Beach County (Fla.) and Houston have been forced to make the difficult decision to start school remotely this year.

States and localities have been the frontlines of combating this crisis, but their revenues have plunged because of the economic shutdowns, and expenses have increased because of the fight against the coronavirus. They not only

Reopening public school buildings doesn't happen with an all-caps tweet or an ultimatum from the president.

need funds to provide essential services, the average school will need an additional \$1.2 million, or \$2,300 per student, to open its doors safely—that's \$116 billion we need from the federal government for schools alone. The public overwhelmingly supports additional funding for states and schools, but Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell took the Senate out on vacation without voting on the HEROES Act, which would provide needed funds.

Trump is politicizing opening schools, just as he did with wearing masks. No wonder a majority of American parents see it as risky for schools to reopen in the fall, including majorities across partisan lines. It's also leading teachers with health risks, or who have family members at risk, to consider leaving the profes-

sion. We could face a "brain drain" at the very moment kids need their teachers most.

Many Americans have wondered what would happen if Trump faced a serious crisis, and now we know. Trump had abundant resources at his disposal to fight the pandemic—public health experts, agencies and equipment all ready to be deployed. Instead, he downplayed the threat and called it a hoax. He treated the pandemic as a culture war, refusing to wear a mask, calling it the "Chinese virus," and tweeting that his supporters should "liberate" states instituting shutdowns.

Those shutdowns were meant to buy Trump and the country time to bring the pandemic under control—to get protective equipment where it was needed, ramp up testing and flatten the curve of infections. But Trump wasted precious time with his chaotic, inept response. The sacrifices people have made—isolating; financial hardship; and missing important moments in life, from graduations, to weddings, to being with a loved one in their final moments—were squandered by Trump's incompetence.

Other countries show that it is possible to prevail over the coronavirus—to save lives, preserve livelihoods and return to daily life. Yet in the United States, there are new PPE shortages, there is no national testing system, and Trump says Americans should "live with" the surge in infections. Officials need to act, but their actions must be based upon on science and driven by the common good. That is the way to get back to school and back to work.



Participants in the AFT Roundtable on School Reopening, July 9.

FOLLOW RANDI WEINGARTEN: twitter.com/rweingarten