

Schools must be safe, welcoming—and open

Randi Weingarten, President
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Students are settling into the third straight school year disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic. Since Aug. 1, I have been on the road visiting public schools in 30 communities in 14 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico. I've sensed the trepidation students, parents and school staff feel; how could they not, with the delta variant surging? But what's even more apparent is their excitement—and educators' dedication to making in-person schooling safe, welcoming and joyful. That's why it's all the more frustrating that preventable outbreaks of COVID-19 are leading to widespread school closures, quarantines, illness and even death.

Our kids need to be in school and to stay in school. As I have said since the earliest days of the pandemic, safety protocols are not barriers to in-person learning—they are the way back. Schools have no higher priority than protecting the lives of students and staff. The AFT has consistently advocated for safe in-person schooling with layered mitigation measures that include masking, physical distancing, surveillance testing, ventilation upgrades and—the most effective way to protect lives—vaccination. Educators are leading the way with one of the highest vaccination rates of any profession; prior to any mandates, 90 percent of AFT educator members were fully vaccinated to protect themselves and others.

The AFT's Back to School for All campaign has provided \$5 million in grants to more than 1,800 of our local unions in both red states and blue states that together educate more than 20 million students. These grants are funding vaccination clinics, billboards and radio ads. Many local unions are hosting community fairs with free books, food, games, and opportunities for parents to talk with teachers and ask questions. Many others have canvassed door to door and participated in phone-banking this summer and fall to encourage families to send their children back to school, with a special focus on students who attended little or no school last year.

This is a moment to build safe and welcoming environments in every school so we can help kids not only recover from the disruptions of the past 18 months but thrive. The places doing this most successfully are where educators and school leaders are [working together](#), creating trust and transparency. Conversely, governors trying to score ideological points by banning mask mandates and bul-

lying school leaders for implementing safety protocols are stoking hostile and unsafe climates. You see it in the disruptions and violence at schools and school board meetings over health and safety measures as well as curriculum. At its core, the recent attempt to recall California Gov. Gavin Newsom was a referendum on precautions against the coronavirus, and voters chose safety.

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Teachers are focused on students' academic recovery and acceleration. We are using approaches like project-based learning, which engages students in solving a real-world problem or answering a complex question, rather than fixating on testing. We are emphasizing literacy, which unlocks all other learning. We know students need art, music, movement and other opportunities that ignite their creativity. And, after a pandemic that has been hard on everyone, and *really* hard for many children, they need to connect—with their peers and with adults who care deeply for them.

Educators are also focused on their students' social and emotional needs, knowing that stress and isolation during the pandemic have led to a surge in depression and anxiety. But teachers can't do this alone. We need

social workers, counselors and nurses—and enough of them so they're not stretched so thin that children's needs go unmet. We need more community schools, where students and their families can access medical and mental health services, social supports, food assistance and other urgent supports so students can focus on learning—and on just being kids.

That is the promise and purpose of our public schools; as a community of educators, we are helping all our students thrive, one by one. And, in so doing, we can help heal our nation.

I won't gloss over how challenging this year (or longer) of recovery will be. The delta variant has thrown us a curveball, and there are too many places where adults are simply not doing what they can to keep students and the school community safe. Our students are returning with immense needs—social, emotional, academic and physical. The Biden administration has led efforts to get additional staffing and support to schools, but it's impossible to overstate how great the needs are. Teachers and school staff have just been through the second-hardest year of their professional lives. What's the hardest? The school year that has just gotten underway.

We have learned during this pandemic that one thing most Americans agree on is the importance of safe, strong, supported public schools. I can assure you that America's educators are doing all they can to meet the challenges ahead, to help our children recover and grow, and to help them find joy in each day.



Photo: Brett Sherman

Weingarten, center, with students at PS/MS 5 Port Morris in the Bronx on Aug. 17.

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