

An open letter to the school communities in Westchester, Putnam, Orange and Rockland Counties from the leadership of teacher and staff unions:

We feel compelled to write to you in a shared voice, as there are universal elements to our concerns about re-entry into the schools this September. It is important to note that this is a discussion about re-entry, not reopening. The education of children is, and has always been, our top concern. One truth that cannot be ignored as a necessary precursor to any successful model of instruction is a safe learning space. Though we will open this September for instruction, the only question is the modality of that instruction.

All districts in New York were required to create a re-entry plan that addressed three options: full virtual, hybrid, and full in-person instruction. The hybrid model is the most popular one for re-entry this September, but it poses significant risks. The hybrid model requirement gained traction in the state early on, but unfortunately, most of what we have recently learned about Covid-19 and children calls the safety of this model into question. These risks are not a reflection of inadequate efforts by any one district or administrative team in protecting the children and staff in their schools. Rather, they are inherent inadequacies when a system designed around instructing students is tasked with creating learning environments that will protect children and teachers during a viral pandemic. Additionally, there has been a failure in state and federal governments to ensure that adequate testing, PPE, and HVAC filtration systems are readily available. The requirements for the district plans were provided by the Governor's office and the State Education Department in the middle of July and they were to be completed by July 31. The Governor even added new testing and contact tracing requirements in the first week of August.

To create truly safe reentry plans districts would require more time, direction, and resources. It is telling that neither the state nor federal governments have provided additional resources to help ensure a safe re-entry. Districts have been on their own.

Educators approach every task with a "can do" attitude. Throughout the months of July and August, teams in each district leaned in and got the job done. The plans were made and it is truly impressive work. The problem, however, is that they are plans to meet government requirements for safety; they are not necessarily plans to make the schools as safe as they can be. The limits of these plans could be seen close to home this summer when the Greenburgh-North Castle school experienced an outbreak of Covid 19, despite meeting or exceeding all Department of Health guidelines and having a very small student population. As anyone with any experience planning school events can attest, even the best plans on paper never match what happens once actual students are brought in. Every plan assumes a well-behaved student body that will follow all directives and maintain masks and social distancing, even during hall passing. Plans assume we will be able to hire enough leave replacements, substitutes, and monitors to supervise students in the next three weeks. This will not occur. When schools reopen with the potential of being understaffed, it will make an already unsafe situation even worse.

In every survey conducted about reentry, the most important condition people have is that the schools be safe. The phrase “Maslow before Bloom” is never more applicable than the current situation. It is irrational to expect students will be able to learn in any reasonable manner, when their teachers and classrooms are constantly conveying the need for vigilance in mask-wearing and social distancing. The constant need for vigilance cannot help but be internalized as fear and anxiety. At best, schools will be more similar to a well-meaning prison than an actual rich learning environment where thoughts can be shared and joy can be expressed.

Before we can return to schools we must be sure that every reasonable precaution has been met in order for schools to be safe. The goal cannot be to just mitigate risk, but to create the safest possible learning environment. Many of these requirements go well beyond the capability of an individual school district and require action at the state or federal level. We may feel powerless to secure what is necessary; that, however, does not change the reality of its necessity.

To ensure that in-person instruction begins safely, every school district should be putting into place the following measures that create the highest health and safety standards for our students, teachers and staff:

- All building-wide HVAC systems must be upgraded to a minimum of MERV-13 filtration, and if existing systems cannot be upgraded, portable units with HEPA filtration must be available for all indoor spaces.
- There must be uniform standards for COVID testing that help monitor asymptomatic spread. COVID testing must provide accurate and reliable results within 24 hours in order to monitor asymptomatic spread. The current wait time can be as high as 12 days, which is not adequate to help prevent the spread of COVID by asymptomatic individuals infected with COVID in our schools.
- Supply lines for PPE must be prioritized to deliver all necessary PPE to schools in a timely fashion. All schools must have an adequate supply of PPE at all times, including enhanced PPE for students and employees who require it.
- School districts must be able to guarantee that there is sufficient staff to supervise students, and provide instruction, even as individual staff members are absent for illness or quarantine, child-care, or personal leaves.
- There must be a 100% virtual option for teachers and students that are medically compromised.
- Plans should require a minimum 14-day shutdown once closed for Covid 19 issues.

Last year was the most challenging instructional year any teacher experienced. There is no teacher who looks forward to beginning the year using remote instruction. Everything about teaching virtually is more complicated. For educators, their classroom is their space. It is where they conjure children’s dreams and give them the tools to fulfill them. Computers are sterile imposters that rob the experience of the richness of our relationships with our students. Educators and students need to not only feel safe, but must actually be safe in their working and

learning environments. Districts need to strive to meet these expectations. There is too much at stake to fall short of the safest possible model.

Additional Resources:

Hybrid Model Risks

<https://www.wired.com/story/hybrid-schooling-is-the-most-dangerous-option-of-all/>

Testing:

<https://covidstates.net/COVID19%20CONSORTIUM%20REPORT%208%20TEST%20JULY%202020.pdf>

HVAC:

<https://www.ashrae.org/file%20library/technical%20resources/covid-19/ashrae-reopening-schools.pdf>

New Information on Children and Covid 19

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-scientists-know-about-how-children-spread-covid-19-180975396/>

<https://www.lohud.com/story/opinion/2020/08/12/westchester-doctor-school-chronic-illness/3331348001/>

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/12/health/covid-kids-school-gupta-essay/index.html>

<https://www.lohud.com/story/news/education/2020/07/29/greenburgh-north-castle-summer-school-coronavirus/5530181002/>

Cosigning Presidents

Marcia Heffler

Dobbs Ferry United Teachers

Edward Caperna

USWOM

Michael Lillis

Lakeland Federation of Teachers

Nate Morgan

Hastings Teachers Association

Vanessa Vaccaro

Ossining Teachers Association

Tom McMahon

Mahopac Teachers' Association

Jennifer Maldonado

Hendrick Hudson Education Association

Elisa Rosen

Hendrick Hudson Education Association

David Wixted	Scarsdale Teachers Association
Anthony Nicodemo	Greenburgh North Castle United Teachers
Mary Claire Breslin	New Rochelle Federation of United School Employees
Samantha Rosado-Ciriello	Yonkers Federation of Teachers
Brenda O'Shea	Somers Faculty Association
Andrea McCue	Haldane Faculty Association
James Groven	Irvington Faculty Association
Judith A. Kelly	Teachers' Association of the Tarrytowns
Chris Tyler	Harrison Association of Teachers
Jeanne Whelan	Tuckahoe Teachers' Association
Roseanna Cutietta	Hawthorne Cedar Knolls Federation of Teachers
Rick Tivnan	Brewster Teachers' Association
Carene Domato	Mt. Vernon Federation of Teachers
Melissa Barreto	BOCES Teachers' Association
Jeff Yonkers	NYSUT ED 16 Director
Sean Kennedy	Yorktown Congress of Teachers
Lisa Jackson	Carmel Teachers' Association
Janet Knight	Mamaroneck Teachers' Association
José Fernandez	Peekskill Faculty Association
Amy Geiger	Katonah-Lewisboro District Teachers' Association
Kathleen Fox	Edgemont Teachers' Association
Miriam Longobardi	Chappaqua Congress of Teachers
Jennifer Cole	Greenburgh Eleven Federation of Teachers
Jim Nolan	Mount Pleasant Cottage School Teachers Association
Kara McCormick-Lyons	White Plains Teachers' Association

Alyson Tina	Ardsley Congress of Teachers
Ryan Odell	Putnam Valley Federation of Teachers
Catherine Armisto	United Staff Association (PNW BOCES)
Vincent Kennedy	Katonah-Lewisboro Support Staff Association
Jennifer Moore	Croton Teachers' Association
Melinda Merkel	Rye Neck Teachers' Association
Jim Agnello	Bronxville Teachers' Association
Kevin Budzynski	Elmsford Teachers Association
Clare Delongchamp	Eastchester Teachers' Association
Vanessa Van Deusen	Graham School Federation of Teachers
Brenda Wright	Cornwall Teachers' Association
Virginia Campbell	Mount Pleasant Teachers Association
Michael Groarke	Bedford Teachers' Association
Sparrow Tobin	Board of Directors NYSUT ED14
Laura Beck	Orange-Ulster BOCES Teachers Association
Ray Hodges	Monroe-Woodbury Teachers Association
Theresa Uhelsky	Minisink Valley Teachers Association
Chris White	Middletown Teachers Association
Jon Wedvik	Clarkstown Teachers Association