



PHILADELPHIA

FEDERATION of TEACHERS

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School Board Testimony Submission | Topic: Reopening School Buildings

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On behalf of the more than 13,000 members of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, I want to thank the Board, Dr. Hite, and his administration for responding to our collective outcry regarding reopening school buildings.

While the decision for buildings to remain closed is painful, it is entirely warranted. It will save lives. We have said from the start that reopening must be rooted in science.

Over the past week, my team and I discussed and reviewed the District's initial reopening plan with our membership. I shared some of our concerns with the Board last week, and since then, we have conducted an [additional member survey](#). In that survey of well over **7,500 members**, only **8%** said they feel personally safe reentering buildings. Only **6%** felt it would be safe for their students to enter buildings.

A full return to virtual learning for the first quarter, at minimum, is necessary. This is not a position we take lightly. Our members want to be in buildings doing the jobs they love—when it is safe to do so. Our children learn best in face to face environments, but we cannot compromise the physical safety of the students and staff. **Necessary as it is, this course of action absolutely presents countless challenges; the PFT is, and has been, ready to engage in thoughtful collaboration on how we can best serve our students while keeping them safe.**

To say that remote learning is not ideal is an understatement. But we also saw the incredible efforts of our educators this spring to make it work. And there is perhaps a new understanding across the country that schools are a cornerstone of our society—the shift to remote learning certainly awakened a new-found appreciation for the role of educators.

An entire education system was upended overnight, and our educators' efforts were incredible. I think of **Chef Bell** and **Chef Pretlow**, two of our CTE teachers who created amazing interactive cooking videos and lessons with their students. I think of Marin's **Christine Palermo** who crowdsourced neighbors for books, delivered supplies to her entire class, and had a nook in her home set up to conduct read-alouds for her kindergarteners each day. I think of the science laboratories set up by Cramp's **Dan Fitzsimmons** and Decatur's **Yvette Cheatham**—students witnessed experiments, observed plants growing—these veteran educators reinvented everything to meet their students' needs.

But let's be clear: remote learning was an enormous challenge that fell short in a number of ways. So this fall, our city must do better. And we are on a tight timeline to ensure that it is done right for our young people.

Moving forward, it will be important to address five critical areas of need:

1. The need for technology access

We are encouraged by the Superintendent's promise to ensure internet connectivity and devices for every student.

As we move forward towards a virtual start, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of connectivity for students *and* staff. Our union is ready to continue to elevate this need and ensure that we are doing all we can to support the District's efforts to address this urgent issue. As the home city of Comcast, Philadelphia should be well-suited to tap into this enormous resource to help our children access their education.

2. The need for thoughtful, innovative, and collaborative curriculum

We need an educational program this fall that meets the needs of all of our children. For too many, remote learning as it was structured in the spring was simply inaccessible. For students with special needs and for students learning English, remote learning can present particular challenges.

This is why our [reopening report](#) earlier this month called for the preparation of a fully remote educational program. We are prepared to work collaboratively with the District to help ensure that the needs of the students we serve are met.

3. The need for funding

School buildings will, eventually, reopen. We do not yet know when, because we do not yet know when it will be safe. We do know that reopening buildings can only take place when the virus threshold criteria we set forth are met; *and* we know that an influx of funding will be paramount.

It is reprehensible that, even in--or perhaps especially in--a time of crisis, both the current occupant of the White House and his Secretary of Education have not only shirked their responsibility to adequately fund public education, but they have actively worked against public schools and the children we serve. Their threats to withhold federal relief in the name of advancing a voucher agenda is unsurprising but deeply callous nonetheless.

We need the HEROES Act, and we need it now—what the Senate Majority Leader has proposed is insufficient and insulting. The HEROES Act is slated to bring more than [\\$3 billion in education funding to Pennsylvania alone](#). This is not money that would be nice to have. We need the funding to do our jobs.

I urge every Pennsylvanian to actively engage in our fight for federal funding so that when buildings reopen, we will be best prepared to welcome our young people to a safe and healthy environment. You can learn more at aft.org/heroesact.

4. The need for building remediation

The PFT established the [Fund Our Facilities Coalition](#) to work towards real solutions to the massive infrastructure problems facing our schools. We have

made significant inroads, but the work ahead, particularly in light of the COVID-19 crisis, is massive. The efforts to remediate toxic conditions in our schools must be accelerated, and the extended building closure must be utilized to complete planned, scheduled, and newly identified remediation work.

We urge the District to share requested facilities information with us in a timely manner and work to truly partner with us on efforts to prepare buildings for reopening. This will include the remediation of toxic schools and the preparation of buildings to implement the standards that we outlined in our [reopening report](#).

5. The need for equity

The digital divide, the facilities crisis, and an overall lack of critical resources are emblematic of the profound inequity that has been further exacerbated by COVID-19. It is why we need not only a specific—and fast—strategy to address the internet access issues and immediate building remediation issues, but it is also why our union has issued our [Five Principles of Racial Justice](#) to define the racial justice work we are doing and need to do. I look forward to engaging in this work with members of the Board and with District leadership.

The task ahead is monumental. Parents, students, and educators are anxious about what the fall will bring.

I wish we were in a position to be able to say: schools are safe, our children and educators can return to this sacred place. But we are not. We cannot reopen buildings until the science allows us to, and until there is a workable plan to safeguard the students and staff of this School District.

The District made the right call here, and I hope it is a call that stops the current uptick in COVID cases in Philadelphia and across the Commonwealth.

The PFT is ready and willing to engage in a collaborative effort to ensure that we are doing all we can to support students, families, and educators in these unprecedented, stressful, and trying times.