

AFT Pennsylvania President Arthur Steinberg

Testimony | PA Senate Democratic Policy Committee | Hearing on Responsible Reopening

Monday, August 3, 2020 | Virtual

Thank you Chairwoman Boscola and the Honorable members of this Committee for the invitation to speak on the incredibly important and timely subject of responsible reopening of schools.

I am Arthur Steinberg, President of AFT Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers. I am proud to be back here in front of this committee on behalf of our 36,000 members and 61 locals to again discuss the decisions ahead of the General Assembly, counties, municipalities, school districts, educators, and parents across the Commonwealth regarding the quickly approaching school year.

As I said in my comments in front of the Joint Senate and House Committee two weeks ago, and it bears repeating: I want to thank educators for a heroic and remarkable performance over the last four months. In the face of so much uncertainty, our teachers stepped up for their students.

I also want to state, unequivocally, from the outset: teachers want to be back in their classrooms.

In fact, in June, our national union conducted a poll in which 76 percent of AFT members across the US said they were comfortable returning to school buildings if the proper safeguards were in place. But because of the utter lack of response from the federal government, our members are now afraid and angry. Many are quitting, retiring or writing their wills. Parents are afraid and angry, too. A recent AP poll shows that the majority of Americans think that school buildings should only reopen with major adjustments or revert to remote instruction.

Given the severity of this virus, AFT Pennsylvania does not believe schools can safely reopen unless there is a sustained consistent downward trajectory of cases as demonstrated by three community health gatekeeping benchmarks.

- First, 50 cases per 100,000 of population over a fourteen-day period. This is necessary to document that the total numbers of those diagnosed with COVID-19 are in decline.



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- Next, the positivity rate must be less than or equal to five percent over the most recent 14-day period. This is a basic World Health Organization recommendation and one adopted by many other health organizations as well. The positivity rate reflects the percentage of positive tests out of the total number of tests performed over a given period of time. High positivity rates typically indicate inadequacies in testing capacity; if we don't test enough, then we don't know enough. On the other hand, low positivity rates suggest that enough testing is being performed to make informed decisions about reopening schools.
- Finally, the effective transmission rate, referred to as the "R-number." The R-number indicates how many uninfected people would become infected if they come into contact with someone who has COVID-19. To stop spread, and see the virus die out requires that the effective R-number is and remains below 1 for 14 consecutive days prior to any return to school buildings.

These three standards, taken together, are considered by AFT Pennsylvania to be consistent with the highest order step within the CDC Hierarchy of Controls and must be implemented. Only after all of these benchmarks are met, do we think it might be safe enough to return to in-school learning.

Safety

We only have one chance to get reopening schools right. The novel coronavirus, COVID-19, is deadly.

However, before we can even consider reopening schools, there are dangers to mitigate and public health benchmarks to hit in order to protect the educators and workers who occupy those buildings every single day.

A comprehensive and implementable Physical Distancing Program is an essential component of any effort to reopen our public schools. It is crucial that district-wide and school specific planning be urgently done now and with meaningful involvement and participation by stakeholders in order to be able to safely open school for the 2020-2021 school year.

In Pennsylvania, nearly a quarter of K-12 teachers may be at higher risk of contracting a severe case of COVID-19 because they are over 50 years old. Add to that anyone younger than 50 who has pre-existing conditions like asthma, diabetes, or hypertension. Then, add to that any educator who does not fit into either of these categories, but lives with and/or cares for someone who is a member of a vulnerable population. That number becomes staggering quickly.

3031 Walton Road, Building A, Suite 340, Plymouth Meeting, PA 19462 | 215-587-6784

10 S. 19th Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15203 | 412-431-5900

600 N. Second Street, Harrisburg, PA 17101 | 717-238-9351

www.aftpa.org  AFT Pennsylvania  @AFTPAUnion

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Additionally, many staff are in close, daily contact with a large number of children and some staff members in particular have direct responsibility for: [a] helping ill or potentially ill students and staff (e.g. school nurses); [b] working with children with special needs of various kinds who require diaper changes, toileting assistance, help with eating, etc. [school educational and support staff]; and [c] for wiping down “dirty” surfaces and for cleaning up spills, that may include bodily fluids.

For these reasons, before schools can open, districts must identify all high-risk staff and students in order to develop and implement special precautions to reduce their opportunity for exposure. As well as identify staff members who reside in the same household and/or who are in regular close contact with high risk individuals and follow the same guidelines.

Our Commonwealth, counties, and school districts must also provide adequate testing, contact tracing, and plans for quarantine and isolation before schools can reopen.

Finally each school must have a detailed step by step protocol for when there is a confirmed COVID-19 case.

Resources

This pandemic has brought into sharp relief the inequities in our system. The lack of universally available broadband internet, the need for schools to feed many of our kids, and the limits of remote instruction are among the examples that highlight the differences between rich and poor districts. More broadly, these issues nearly all relate to funding inequality across Pennsylvania schools, the most inequitable in the nation.

In order to deliver in-person or virtual learning, school districts across Pennsylvania will need resources. And, by “resources,” I mean money. As the members of this committee are aware, for far too long, the state government portion of funding to our school districts has been both declining and uneven. This has shifted the burden to local property taxpayers and led to the quality of education being tied to a student’s zip code. And, in this time of COVID-19, those inequities in funding over time have compounded to create a disaster for already-neglected districts.

A critical step toward safe in-person learning is ensuring adequate ventilation in classrooms. Simply opening the windows in a classroom is most often not enough to circulate fresh air. The largest ventilation costs are in ensuring that HVAC systems are correctly pressurized and filtered to keep fresh air circulating into classrooms and removing as many potentially viral particulates from the air as we can.

And, although we are still learning about this disease, studies published within the past three weeks by the CDC and the Journal of the American Medical Association suggest that “cloth face coverings are one of the most powerful weapons we have to slow and

stop the spread of the virus.”¹ Therefore, we also must stand firm in our assertion that schools will not be safe to occupy if and until Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is made universally available. 100% compliance by students, especially those in kindergarten through third grade, ample PPE supplies must be guaranteed for teachers and staff. PPE are our last line of defense against this virus; without it, returning to school will be impossible.

The \$100 million in discretionary funding provided to Pennsylvania from the CARES Act is a good start toward addressing school facilities issues across the Commonwealth. This money should be distributed using the fair funding formula so that LEAs receive equitable funding.

We will also be asking the members of this committee—as well as your colleagues in the House—to sign on to a letter to Pennsylvania’s US Senators asking for the swift adoption of the HEROES Act, which still sits on Senator McConnell’s desk. The HEROES Act would provide at least \$3.2Billion in education funding to Pennsylvania, which would go a long way toward addressing many of these issues.

Digital Divide

There is a high likelihood that, even if schools open on time for in-person learning this fall, they will undergo at least temporary closures and the need to virtually learn. This transition must be quick and seamless, in contrast to the patchwork we saw in March as districts scrambled to ensure students and educators had access to necessary technology.

As we all know, since we are conducting this hearing via Zoom, broadband internet access is critically important to the provision of a virtual learning program. Lucky for our state Senate, myself, and the other testifiers in this hearing, we have the requisite internet bandwidth to deliver and receive live conversations via our computer screens. But this is not true for many Pennsylvania students and families.

A 2019 report from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania found that there are no counties in Pennsylvania where at least half the population receives broadband connection.² According to this report, the Federal Communications Commission’s official estimate that over 800,000 Pennsylvanians lack access to broadband connectivity is likely to be incorrectly low. Broadband speeds and access are significantly lower in rural counties in

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/p0714-americans-to-wear-masks.html>

² [https://www.rural.palegislature.us/broadband/Broadband Availability and Access in Rural Pennsylvania 2019 Report.pdf](https://www.rural.palegislature.us/broadband/Broadband%20Availability%20and%20Access%20in%20Rural%20Pennsylvania%202019%20Report.pdf)

Pennsylvania due to infrastructure and, frankly, the unwillingness of Internet Service Providers to expand into markets they deem unprofitable.

In urban areas like Philadelphia, the issue is not so much infrastructure as it is affordability. Philadelphia ranks fourth lowest among the 25 largest cities in the nation for the number of households without internet access at 16%.³ And, a 2019 survey by the School District of Philadelphia found that only 45% of students in grades three through five accessed the internet from a computer at home, compared with 56% in grades six through eight, and 58% for high school students.

A survey conducted by Pittsburgh Public Schools found that more than 1,500 of their 23,000 students have no internet. Even more households don't have enough computers or devices for each child to do schoolwork at home.⁴

While the HEROES Act, passed by the US House of Representatives in May would provide \$5.5 billion in broadband connectivity funding, we are still waiting on the US Senate to act, another reason we are grateful to the Pennsylvania State Senators holding this hearing today. This is long overdue funding anyway, but it is especially important now.

Unfortunately, without the funding to ensure universal broadband internet connectivity and devices, there will be students who fall behind in a virtual learning environment.

Closing

I will state again for the record that AFT Pennsylvania members want to be back in the classroom. We recognize the harm that social isolation can do to our students and that kids generally thrive more with in-person instruction. However, the lack of a coordinated response by our federal government to provide for universal testing, comprehensive contact tracing, adequate PPE, or even a mask mandate has resulted in the deaths of over 150,000 Americans. Asking teachers, students, parents, and communities to resume school as if none of this is happening is irresponsible.

And, to provide a virtual learning environment which does not cause the most vulnerable of our students to fall further behind, we need a more uniform strategy to ensure broadband connectivity for all students and educators.

Thank you for inviting me to speak today, and I look forward to taking any questions you may have.

³ <https://www.inquirer.com/education/coronavirus-students-digital-divide-philadelphia-comcast-20200403.html>

⁴ <https://www.publicsource.org/how-the-pandemic-is-exacerbating-the-digital-divide-in-allegheny-county/>