



PHILADELPHIA FEDERATION of TEACHERS

Jerry T. Jordan
President, Philadelphia Federation of Teachers

PA Senate Democratic Policy Committee Testimony
Topic: Reopening School Buildings

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Good morning, I'm Jerry Jordan, President of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. Thank you Senator Boscola and the entire committee for taking the time to host this important hearing and for listening to the experts regarding school reopening.

This spring, our education system was turned upside down, and our 13,000 members shifted into an entirely unbuilt remote learning model. Their efforts, like those of our students and our parents, were remarkable. But let me be clear: remote learning is a far cry from in-person learning. For students with special needs, students learning English, and students experiencing poverty--the challenges of remote learning can be exacerbated even more.

To be sure, our educators want to be in schools, supporting our students face to face, **as long as it is safe**. When students and staff walk through the doors of our schools, they must not be asked to jeopardize their lives and the lives of their families.

Over the course of the COVID-19 crisis, we have conducted four major surveys of our membership and received well over 25,000 responses. Our most recent [member survey](#), conducted after the School District of Philadelphia released their original reopening plan, encompassed feedback from over **7,500 members**. Of the respondents, only **8%** said they feel personally safe reentering buildings, and only **6%** felt it would be safe for their students to enter buildings.

In July, the [PFT issued our report on reopening requirements](#), where we laid out nine considerations that must be met in order to consider reopening buildings. I have shared a copy of the report with you for reference, and I would like to point out that the foundation of any reopening plan is virus tracking. Arthur will talk more about the science behind our requirements, so I'll simply say that without meeting these thresholds, it will not be safe to reopen buildings.

As we consider how to safely reopen buildings, once we have met the thresholds of 5% transmission rate and 1% reproduction rate, there will be hundreds of additional factors, and we must plan for those now. These include but are not limited to issues of PPE, social distancing protocol founded on square footage requirements, addressing perilous ventilation issues, and funding. The roadmap we have provided in our reopening report must be the foundation for how to reopen buildings safely.

While the decision for buildings to remain closed is painful, it is entirely warranted. It will save lives. 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.

You'll hear shortly from one of our members, Keith Pretlow, on the incredible efforts he made as a culinary arts teacher to ensure he was connecting with his students during remote learning. You have also received [thoughtful testimony](#) from another phenomenal Philadelphia educator, Charlotte McCracken. In her [testimony](#), Charlotte recounts her experiences teaching K-4 science remotely-- dissecting owl pellets in her dining room over Google Meet, having students' grandparents participate in their remote learning, and shares the very real concerns she has regarding the facilities issues in her building.

Charlotte writes, *"I have struggled and continue to struggle as I come to terms with not being able to physically set up my science lab at the end of August. While I want nothing more than to be setting up lab tables and experiment kits, I know it is currently unsafe to do so."*

This encompasses the sentiment of so many of our educators. Remote learning is an enormous challenge that fell short in a number of ways this spring. So this fall, our city, our commonwealth, and our country must do better. And we are on a tight timeline to ensure that it is done right for our young people.

Moving forward, we must address [five critical areas of need](#). I've provided more background on each item as an [appendix](#) to my testimony, but for now, I'd just like to mention these five areas:

1. The need for technology access
2. The need for thoughtful, innovative, and collaborative curriculum
3. The need for funding
4. The need for building remediation
5. The need for equity

The task ahead is monumental. The anxiety around reopening buildings, or not, is very real.

I wish we were in a position to be able to say that schools are safe to open their doors. But in Philadelphia, we are not. We cannot reopen buildings until the science allows us to, *and* until there is a workable plan to safeguard our students and staff.

Before I close, I want to thank each and every one of my members, and all of Pennsylvania's educators, for their incredible work both in and out of the classrooms.

I again want to thank the members of this committee, many of whom have been engaged with us in our facilities work for quite some time now. Further, I want to thank the Governor and Dr. Levine for their leadership throughout this crisis. And lastly, I would be remiss if I did not thank Secretary Rivera for his unwavering commitment to the children of Pennsylvania.

Thank you again for this opportunity.

Appendices:

- 1. Five Critical Areas**
- 2. PFT Reopening Report**
- 3. PFT Member Survey**