

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 4, 2021

Rochelle P. Walensky, MD, MPH
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30329

Dear Director Walensky:

Thank you for your hard work and dedication to protecting Americans from the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19). We are glad to see that our most vulnerable and essential populations are being vaccinated from this horrific disease. The COVID-19 pandemic has taken too many of our loved ones, damaged our economy, and robbed us of too many important experiences.

While it is hard enough to deal with the challenges caused by the pandemic as adults, it is much harder for our children. Our kids have missed so many experiences and milestones this past year, both in education and socialization. We know that every parent, including ourselves, wants their child to be able to return to a safe and stable school environment where they can see their friends and receive the best education possible.

We therefore believe that prioritizing vaccinations for teachers and school staff is critical. We should do so for the same reason we decided to vaccinate first responders like firefighters and police officers — because they perform an indispensable public function that puts them at risk.

We agree with President Biden’s recent statements that schools must open for safe, in-person learning as quickly as possible and that the health and safety of children, educators, and their families is paramount. It is essential that our students return to learning safely in the classroom and to receive the highest quality of education possible.

Unfortunately, we do not yet know the full extent of our students’ learning losses during this past year. However, along with troubling reports of chronic absenteeism, we have seen indications that declines in reading and math proficiency could be significant¹. Moreover, we have reason to

¹ The Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University. “Estimates of Learning Loss in the 2019-2020 School Year.” October 2020.

believe that this learning loss has already cost our students an estimated three percent of career earnings². Additionally, these school closures further exacerbate learning gaps among low-income students³. While our teachers have worked tirelessly to adapt their lesson plans and keep students engaged, we believe there is no substitute for learning in-person.

We have also received troubling reports of declining mental health among youth dealing with the challenges of the pandemic and the lack of in-person socialization with their peers. We have heard first-hand from students, who have expressed that their biggest challenge with virtual school is coping with the feelings of isolation. Unfortunately, we are seeing a rise in youth mental health crises, including increased youth emergency room visits related to mental health⁴ and a rise in student suicides in school districts across the country. We cannot allow this youth mental health crisis to worsen.

It is our opinion that the most efficient and effective way to achieve this is by prioritizing the vaccination of our educators and staff, who have been working hard to teach our students from home, and, in many cases, have bravely gone into classrooms throughout the pandemic. Sadly, a number of these educators and staff members have contracted the virus in our local schools while teaching our children on the front lines. As of February 1, 2021, eighteen states, including New York, Connecticut, and Delaware, have already started vaccinating all teachers; it's key to meeting the President's hundred day reopening goal. Additionally, other countries have prioritized reopening schools for in-person learning over other in-person activities, such as indoor dining. We must get our children back to school.

Moreover, it's essential that clear and consistent guidelines must be established at all levels of government to mitigate confusion regarding what constitutes exposure to the virus and how long individuals must quarantine. Finally, we believe that schools should administer regular COVID-19 tests, including pooled testing, that are funded by the federal government. This will help manage COVID-19 cases within the school population and limit the potential for outbreaks of the virus.

For the safety and well-being of both our students and educators, we are asking that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention take the following steps to support the safe return to in-person learning across the country:

² Hanushek, Eric, and Ludger Woessmann. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development "The Economic Impacts of Learning Losses" September 2020.

³ Policy Analysis for California Education. "COVID 19 and the Educational Equity Crisis" January 2021.

⁴ "Mental Health-Related Emergency Department Visits Among Children Aged 18 Years During the COVID-19 Pandemic - United States, January 1-October 17, 2020"

- Provide updated information on available testing technology and procedures to ensure that schools are optimizing their testing supply;
- Encourage all states and counties to adopt a standard set of guidelines about when and how to quarantine to mitigate confusion, as well as the definitions of “meaningful contact” and “exposure”; and
- Encourage all states to prioritize the vaccination of educators in the same category as the vaccination of first responders.

We agree on the importance of returning our students to in-person instruction as quickly as possible while ensuring the safety of our teachers, school personnel, students, families, and communities. Thank you again for your efforts in protecting our communities throughout New Jersey and the United States. We appreciate your prompt consideration of our request.

Sincerely,



Josh Gottheimer
MEMBER OF CONGRESS



Tom Malinowski
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

cc: Philip Rosenfelt, Acting Secretary, United States Department of Education