



**Testimony of the
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Public Hearing Regarding
Instructing preK-12 Students During COVID-19**

**Presented to the
House Democratic Policy Committee
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**By
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Good morning, Chairman Sturla, Representative Merski, and members of the House Democratic Policy Committee. My name is Aaron Chapin. I am the Vice President of PSEA and on behalf of our 181,000 members, thank you for inviting PSEA to participate in this hearing.

In addition to serving as PSEA's Vice President, I'm also a fifth-grade teacher, husband to a special education teacher, and father to a daughter entering her freshman year of high school. Fair to say, the issue of providing instruction to students for the 2020-2021 school year is very personal for me.

Many of our schools are beginning the return to school this week – some entirely in-person, others entirely remote, and others through a hybrid or blended approach. Students, staff, educators, administrators, and families could never have imagined this reality – yet we are all navigating the complexities and challenges to the best of our ability during this historic crisis.

In all my years in the classroom and my years as a union leader at the local, regional, and statewide level – I have never witnessed the level of unprecedented change, palpable anxiety, and sense of loss and trauma felt by educators, students, and families as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As communities throughout Pennsylvania prepare to return to school in whatever form, each faces the challenge of not only providing quality continuous education to students in new ways, but also ensuring students and staff are physically *and emotionally* safe as well. The reality of what lies ahead for each of us is staggering – and even more so in our communities with higher needs and fewer resources. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare, and further exacerbated, the growing economic and racial inequities among our communities – everything from access to health care; increased risk of exposure to the disease based on your employment; increased food and housing insecurity; and limited access to technology and supports necessary for successful distance learning. We can not and must not lose sight of this fact as we continue to work together at the statewide and local level to provide our students with essential academic and social and emotional supports.

And while each community's plan for returning this fall should vary based on the needs and input of the local stakeholders, what must *not* vary is a strict adherence to the protocols and safety measures proven most effective for mitigating COVID-19 transmission in our schools. Failing to do so will result in needlessly exposing students, staff, and their families to this deadly virus causing further chaos and anxiety in our communities.

Last spring when the unthinkable became our collective reality, you and your colleagues took swift and decisive action to adopt Act 13 and provide the clarity and protections so desperately needed by our education community. PSEA urges the legislature to demonstrate that leadership once again and enact policies necessary to provide essential health and safety standards and employee protections for the 2020-2021 school year. The following pages contain these urgent needs and recommendations; PSEA stands ready to assist you with this critical effort. Thank you.

PSEA RECOMMENDATIONS:
EMERGENCY LEGISLATION FOR 2020-2021 SCHOOL YEAR

Require face coverings in all school settings by students and staff. The best way to prevent the spread of COVID-19 is by requiring everyone to wear a mask. Period.

Provide Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to essential staff and require robust, regular cleaning of facilities and sanitation regimen. Act 13 included a provision requiring school entities to provide custodial staff with PPE and we recommend this provision be carried forward into any legislation under consideration in the coming weeks. Our custodial staff are at the epicenter of efforts to keep schools clean – including the regular sanitation of surfaces, desks, hallways, handrails, restrooms, cafeterias, and buses. To do this efficiently and safely, districts must have consistent protocols and provide staff with sufficient and appropriate equipment and supplies.

Require notification and contact tracing if a student or employee tests positive. PSEA supports House Bill 2768, recently introduced by Representative Todd Stephens and cosponsored by Rep. Merski – which provides a process around notification of positive COVID-19 test results and clarity about the procedure following a positive result from a student or staff member.

Require clear and detailed quarantine protocols for students and staff. In addition to ensuring consistent procedures when a member of the school community tests positive, PSEA urges the adoption of consistent policies for what must occur when a student or employee shows COVID-19 symptoms during the school day. Sending students and staff members to visit a nurse, who may or may not have PPE, or who might have other students present with health issues unrelated to COVID-19, is not good practice. Our members are concerned that some of the health and safety plans approved by school entities thus far do not adequately address how positive cases among the school community will be addressed.

Ensure employees can safely quarantine if they test positive for COVID, are exposed to COVID, or are caring for a loved one with COVID. If a public school employee is exposed to COVID, we need the employee to quarantine, immediately. However, the very last thing we need are employees unable to quarantine because they lack either the leave time or the financial resources to be off work for two weeks. Ensuring paid leave for individuals exposed to COVID is the right thing to do for our school community, and one of the best possible ways to keep our schools open.

Prohibit schools as polling places or require additional sanitization and ventilation. As we all know, 2020 is a general election year. Many schools are used as polling stations for elections. During these times, it is not wise to have schools physically open as polling stations potentially allowing thousands of people into the schools to vote during a pandemic. This defeats the goal of trying to limit community spread. The easiest solution is to refrain from using schools as polling stations this year. Another option would be to require that schools close on election day – and possibly one or two days thereafter - to sanitize all physical areas of the school where polling stations were placed.

Prohibit furloughs of professional employees due to moving to remote learning.

Equally important, we need to keep teachers serving their students. District enrollment may be more volatile than at any time in recent memory because of this pandemic, but we expect that volatility to smooth out eventually. The very last thing we want is to lose thousands of teachers - who may leave the profession or the state forever - and then be unable to meet student needs once there is a return to in-person instruction and enrollment numbers may increase.

Unavailability of certification assessments may necessitate emergency permits.

The pandemic shut down teacher certification testing sites last spring and limited testing opportunities this summer for certification assessments to be completed. PSEA worked closely with PDE, as well as legislators and staff in both chambers, in developing legislative language to help address these concerns. Senate Bill 1216 - adopted by the Senate and amended last week by the House Education Committee - seeks to remedy these challenging realities. We urge your continued support for Senate Bill 1216 as it makes its way through the legislative process.

Ensure student teacher requirements remain flexible.

The pandemic upended the student teacher experience for many of our future educators and it threatens do so again. This is unfortunate and has the potential to exacerbate the existing teacher shortage crisis. Requirements around student teaching competencies state that no more than 50 percent of student teaching can occur in an online setting. Act 13 provided the Secretary with the authority to waive the twelve-week student teacher requirement under 22 Pa. Code § 354.25(f) for the 2019-20 academic year. This flexibility should be extended through the 2020-21 school year.

Extend provisions pertaining to standardized testing captured in Act 13.

We appreciate the swift action of PDE and the legislature to waive standardized testing requirements as part of Act 13. However, standardized testing remains a problem for the 2020-21 academic year. The last thing students and educators should be worried about next year is standardized testing and the impact of those scores, when the traditional educational model has been upended and many students will be playing catch-up. *Decisions, whether state or local, should not be made using standardized tests for this time period.*

In addition to carrying forward the provisions captured in Act 13, PSEA urges lawmakers to include in upcoming legislation a prohibition on local districts' use of the Keystone Exams as local graduation requirements in the 2020-2021 school year. We need to ensure consistent state policy and messaging around standardized testing at both the state and local levels. Also, given the unprecedented challenges we are all facing, PSEA will be engaging in conversations with PDE about whether or not the effective dates of the new statewide graduation pathways and educator evaluation system should be pushed out another year. (Currently, both take effect beginning in the 2021-22 school year.)

Protect employees that support students in multiple school settings.

Because we're relying on local control for reopening, there is no standard procedure for employees who work in multiple buildings – particularly intermediate unit (“IU”) employees who travel between buildings and serve multiple districts. Each school district has its own plan for reopening and its own schedule. It might be too late, but a requirement for districts to better coordinate with IUs in order to ensure better deployment of IU employees would be helpful.

Provide an extension for continuing education requirements to paraprofessionals.

Paraprofessionals are key to providing a free and appropriate public education to our students with special needs. Like our certified educators, our paraprofessionals have annual continuing education requirements that need to be met. Act 13 extended continuing education requirements for certified educators until June 30, 2021 due to the challenges raised in meeting those requirements due to COVID. We urge the same extension be provided to our paraprofessionals for the 2020-2021 school year and we thank Rep. Miller for already introducing the legislation needed to address this issue and Sen. Langerholc for including this provision in SB 1216.

Keep support staff ready to work.

Our Education Support Professionals (“ESPs”) provide critical services to our schools and students. It would be a disservice to these professionals, and to the schools and students they serve, if they have a lack of clarity about their job status. Schools cannot safely reopen without ESPs — the people who serve lunches, drive buses, and serve as classroom aides. But if these employees are repeatedly furloughed and brought back, and furloughed and brought back, they will be forced to seek other jobs. To keep our schools ready to educate our students, we must keep our support staff employed.