



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

**Public Hearing Regarding
Reopening Schools Fall 2020**

**Presented to the
House Democratic Policy Committee
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**By
Aaron Chapin
PSEA Vice President**

Good morning, Chairman Sturla and members of the House Democratic Policy Committee. Thank you for inviting me to participate in this hearing. My name is Aaron Chapin. I am not just the Vice President of PSEA, but I am a fifth-grade teacher. I am also the husband to a special education teacher and the father to a daughter entering her freshman year of high school. The issue of opening schools this coming fall is very personal to me.

After all these years in the classroom and my years serving as a leader of the union at the local, regional, and now statewide level – I’m certainly no stranger to a certain amount of upheaval and more than a little bit of change. But without question, I have never witnessed the level of unprecedented change triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the required closing of all schools across Pennsylvania. And while I am proud and appreciative of the swift and collective efforts of all stakeholders - including those of you and your colleagues - to take action to support students, families, and educators during the initial months of this crisis, I fully recognize that these actions are not long-term solutions.

The real issue facing us now is how can schools prepare and do what is needed to safely return to some level of in-person instruction this fall? What does that look like? What will it take? These are the questions I am asked on a regular basis by my colleagues, friends, and family.

Given that we do not expect to have widely available testing, treatment, contact tracing, nor a vaccine for COVID-19 in the coming months, we must collectively focus on supporting our schools to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 when the 2020-2021 school year begins.

Successfully reopening our schools - and *keeping* them open - will require extensive planning, engagement, and collaboration among key stakeholders including educators and community members. And the truth is that top-down directives will not work. One-size-fits-all approaches won’t work. What does work, however, is a genuine partnership among stakeholders to implement evidence-based strategies tailored to meet the needs of the local community. This partnership includes ongoing guidance, rooted in the latest public health science, from state and local officials coupled with the necessary technical assistance to implement key strategies. And

none of this can work without sustained engagement and input from educators, students, and families for developing and implementing local plans.

The observations, insights, and expertise of educators and staff - classroom teachers like me; our student support professionals; teaching assistants; educational support professionals focused on food security for our students, as well as those working to keep our facilities clean and safe - are invaluable for the development and successful implementation of effective strategies for meeting the educational, health, and social and emotional needs of all students.

In recognition of both this need for educators to inform planning – as well as the magnitude of the work ahead - to reopen public schools this fall, PSEA joined with 8 other statewide education organizations to develop the [2020 Back to School Task Force Report](#). The report represents the intensive efforts of over 150 individuals providing cross-disciplinary insights, considerations, and resources compiled to help inform local leaders as they work to reopen public schools. The report is intended to supplement the guidance provided by PDE and local health authorities which should drive the local decisions and planning that will ultimately be enacted.

But even with the best planning and stakeholder engagement in the world, Pennsylvania schools cannot open safely and manage continuity of education for all students without significantly more emergency federal funding for education. There is no way to safely reopen schools and keep them open without it. Period.

Pennsylvania school districts are projected to lose up to \$1 billion in local revenue as a result of the COVID-19 economic crisis. Reopening schools safely and providing continuity of education cannot be done if school districts are forced to reduce essential programs and furlough thousands of classroom teachers, school nurses, psychologists, counselors and social workers, reading specialists, and instructional paraprofessionals as well as our essential education support professionals who keep our students – and our school facilities – healthy, clean, and safe.

Congress must step up and provide at least an additional \$175 billion in federal relief funding for public education. The economic recovery of this commonwealth is inextricably linked to the ability of our schools to safely reopen and the opportunity for our students to thrive and succeed.

PSEA lauds our Congressional representatives that voted last month in support of this critical funding. *Now we call upon Senator Toomey and Senator Casey to do everything in their power to fight to ensure the Senate ultimately secures this crucial investment in our collective future.*

On June 25, PDE issued a [comprehensive report](#) prepared in partnership with the [Regional Educational Laboratory \(REL\) Mid-Atlantic at Mathematica](#). The report contains significant research and useful information, including significant feedback from stakeholders including PSEA, and we truly appreciate the Department’s ongoing and diligent efforts. The report makes it clear that any reopening of schools is not without risk of increased infection among students and particularly educators and staff - but implementing evidence-based mitigation strategies such as social distancing; isolation or quarantine on an as needed basis; screening and contact tracing protocols; personal hygiene requirements; in-depth cleaning of all facilities; and increased and improved ventilation throughout the school building “*can substantially reduce the number of infections.*” (page 36, Mathematica report)

These mitigation strategies are essential, but certainly not easy nor inexpensive to implement. And we know that the challenges of implementing them and keeping students and staff safe – and providing quality continuous education to students – are much greater among our at-risk student populations. 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. During the three months that our students were educated virtually, I heard from my colleagues, including my wife who teaches in a low-income urban setting, regarding the disparity that existed between our students. This disparity existed before the health crisis and has only widened these past few months. *There is no doubt that without essential federal emergency funding for schools, these disparities will grow exponentially this fall and in the school years to come.*

As of today, we are less than two months away from the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year for many of our communities. We need to get this right. If we don’t - not only are we putting more Pennsylvanians at risk of contracting COVID-19 – but we could also end up triggering

another round of essential school closures and suffering the significant deleterious and disruptive impacts as a result.

There are no easy answers – but solutions must be adopted. We stand ready to work with you. Thank you again for the opportunity to share our insights with you today.