

January 13, 2021

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The Honorable Noe Ortega
Acting Secretary of Education
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Tenth Floor
333 Market Street
Harrisburg, PA 17126

The Honorable Rachel Levine
Secretary of Health
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Eighth Floor West
625 Forster Street
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Acting Secretary Ortega and Secretary Levine:

I am very concerned about recent changes to Pennsylvania's COVID-19 guidance for school entities in the commonwealth, which would allow additional students to return to in-person instruction before students, school staff, and their families can have confidence that existing state guidelines are being properly followed.

As you know, in my most recent correspondence with you on December 11, I strongly encouraged you to:

- 1) Clarify current guidance that allows school entities to circumvent the length of time COVID-19 health and safety protocols should be followed or avoid school closures altogether;
- 2) Clarify current guidance that may allow school entities to reset their COVID-19 case counts without actually closing schools; and
- 3) Require school entities to clearly and publicly post COVID-19-related information on their web pages for public review.

A copy of that letter is attached.

To this point, these important recommendations have not been implemented. There is no doubt that the educators and support professionals I represent want to return to their classrooms, see their students, and conduct instruction in person. This is clearly the best way to educate Pennsylvania's students.

However, given the number of Pennsylvanians who continue to contract COVID-19 and recognizing that scientists and public health experts have repeatedly and publicly stated that the pandemic will get worse before it gets better, this is not the time to bring more students into schools and classrooms.

We want our students to return, but we want to be absolutely certain that it's safe to do so. Today, it simply isn't.

What state government can and should do is ensure that every school in Pennsylvania is following the state's health and safety guidelines and ensure that the public has easy access to this information. Right now, we still don't have a clear, transparent, statewide process to ascertain whether schools are following rules designed to keep students, staff, and their families safe.

Now is the time to exercise the most extreme caution and compliance, so that we can beat this virus and get our schools back open for in-person instruction once and for all. We can't do this without clear state leadership and a focus on ensuring that every school entity is following state health and safety guidance to the letter.

I encourage you, in the strongest possible terms, to take these steps and take them immediately.

As always, I stand ready to assist you in any way possible in the effort to keep our students, school staff, and their families safe.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rich Askey". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and "A".

Rich Askey

Attachment