

(Association letterhead)

The Honorable Phil Murphy, Governor

(Address)

Dear Governor Murphy,

As the summer begins to wind down, we continue to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects. For the last several weeks, all stakeholders have spent countless hours thinking about, debating, and determining how to execute a reopening plan for our respective school districts. However, this plan must be about more than just reopening the buildings; it must consider the most efficient way to keep our students, staff, and—by extension—their families safe.

The undersigned Union leaders have been working diligently to determine how to make that happen. As we combed through reopening plan guidelines provided by the NJ Department of Education (NJDOE), the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC), we come to the same realization, over and over: ***Our schools are simply not prepared to reopen in a manner that maximizes the health and safety of all.***

To begin, our organizations recommend that all schools implement measures to adhere to proper social distancing guidelines. During a pandemic that feat is nearly impossible; our schools are overcrowded and our class sizes beyond reasonable capacity, rendering us unable to keep students properly distanced.

Additionally, many of our school buildings are not properly ventilated and simply cannot guarantee a healthy environment due to the average age of the buildings. Many of the schools already face indoor air quality issues, and many do not have properly equipped HVAC systems. With the World Health Organization's (WHO) recent declaration that the virus may also be airborne, it is imperative that our indoor air quality environments be the best that they can be. In combination with poor ventilation, most of our schools do not contain the same square footage for each space, thus this will create further concerns when it comes to social distancing and air quality. In fact there are many "new" classrooms that were created by splitting two rooms or converting a custodian's closet into a classroom and they do not contain any windows.

Furthermore, in accordance with new guidance from Dr. Fauci, we firmly believe that masks in addition to protective shields, and/or eye protection should be mandatory for students. As educators, we are the first to admit the challenges that arise when imploring students to keep their masks on. However, we also know that they are never too young to understand their role in keeping themselves—and others—safe. Hand washing and sanitizers are a good start, but

they are not enough. This virus has devastating and ravaging effects on all age groups, and—if masks are required in both indoor and outdoor situations elsewhere—we must have them in schools, too. *Recent studies have shown the virus's devastating and disproportionate effect on Black and Brown communities. It is unconscionable that we wouldn't do everything we can to avoid any New Jersey municipality from becoming an epicenter—and a cautionary tale.*

Moreover, in the absence of a vaccine, there is just no clear way to maintain universal safety for this highly transmittable contagion. New Jersey Annotated Code (NJAC) Title XIII, Ch. 57, Subchapter 4 defines a communicable disease as a specific infectious agent. Within that section, it clearly indicates that if students do not prove they have been immunized against communicable disease, then they cannot attend school (with notable religious exemptions). Admittedly, COVID-19 is not yet on the list, but, by all accounts, it is highly communicable, infectious and can lead to death.

It is for these reasons—and more—that we believe schools should adopt a mandatory virtual reopening plan until it is deemed safe for all students and staff. We fully understand the impact virtual learning has on parents, and we also acknowledge that nothing replaces the benefit of in-person instruction. However, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), National Education Association (NEA), and AASA, The School Superintendents Association, collectively believe that science and community circumstances should guide reopening plans. In their July statement, they state that while returning to school is important for the healthy development and well-being of children, we must pursue re-opening in a way that is safe for all students, teachers, and staff. The only plan that guarantees that is through remote instruction for all students and educators. Yes, we must address the digital divide that still exists, and we need to learn from any shortcomings discovered during our virtual instruction this spring, but the undersigned leaders are committed to doing their part.

But we cannot do it alone. To that end, we call upon all boards of education administration, the board of education, parents, and local, county, and state legislators to come together to do what's best for our community. We must be honest in what we face and where we stand; to do anything less would be irresponsible with potentially disastrous consequences. There is no doubt that these are challenging times and there are many obstacles to overcome between now and safely reopening, but we stand ready to face them. We urge you to stand with us.

***Under Construction: (Reopening schools in the current unsafe conditions is a line in the sand for educators. Make no mistake about it, as a collective force, we will take all of the necessary steps and precautions to ensure the safety of all students and our members.***

***The lives of many are now in your hands.)***

**Sincerely,**

John McEntee, Jr., President, Paterson Education Association  
Michael Vilary, Deptford Education Association President  
Susan J. Sawey, Sparta Education Association President  
Sussex County Education Association President  
Catherine MacManiman, Westampton Education Association President  
Lashaun Arrington, New Brunswick Education Association President  
Jennifer Wein, East Orange Community Charter Education Association President  
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Allyson Spargo, Roxbury Education Association, President  
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Doug Bozarth, Mt. Laurel Educ. Association, President  
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Ryan Ellis, Franklin Education Association, President  
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John Dean, Teaneck Township Education Association, President  
Renee Szporn, Princeton Regional School Education  
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Rosanne Versaci, Hoboken Education Association, President  
John Griffin, Elizabeth Education Association, President  
Dan Mayer, Franklin Township Education Association President  
Lauren Franklin, Long Hill Township Education Association, President  
Asela Laguna-Mourao, Dunellen Education Association, President  
Maura McDermott, Haddon Township Education Association, President  
Theresa Butler, Kittatinny Education Association (Sussex County), CO-President  
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Christine Wagener, Frelinghuysen Education Association, President  
Theresa Fuller, North Plainfield Education Association, President  
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Joseph O'Connor, Ewing support staff ETESSA, President  
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Shari Scheckman, Springfield Education Association, President  
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Lauren Savage, Boonton Township Education Association, Co-President  
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Christine Wagner, Frelinghuysen Education Association, Co-President  
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Anastasia Bach, Passaic County Ed Services Teacher's Commission, President  
Mary Byrne, Florence Township Education Association President