

December 15, 2020

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Executive Director Joe Boyd Honorable Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon, Honorable Senate Pro Tem Toni Atkins, Honorable Members of the California Legislature:

In recent months school reopening has become a highly polarized and increasingly politicized issue as parents, school employees, administrators and elected officials all struggle to safely return California's students to school. Amid the third wave of the pandemic; a statewide shut down; 55 of the state's 58 counties in the Purple Tier and beyond; and the highest transmission, hospitalization and death rates at any point in the pandemic, we – like many Californians – are gravely concerned about the prospect of students, educators and school employees returning to classrooms without the highest safety standards in place.

Let us be clear, no one wants to be back in our classrooms with our students, where we know they learn best, more than educators. Safety, however, should not be a relative or subjective term up to regional or political interpretation. Safety should be a standard. A common standard. A state standard that is uniformly known and enforced.

When California's 6.1 million K-12 students walk into schools, they interact with more than 600,000 school employees. Each day, when these students and employees leave school campuses, they return to their homes and their communities and they touch the lives of nearly 20 million Californians. That's nearly <u>half the population of our state</u>. **It's why CTA continues to believe that schools in communities at Purple Tier levels of transmission and risk should not be open or reopen.** 

California's schools are the heart of their communities. For many of our most vulnerable and underserved populations, they are lifelines. The educational, social and emotional needs of California's students, particularly those who often lack the technological and additional educational support to sustain distance learning, are of paramount concern to our 310,000 educators. We know the victims of COVID-19 are not random. They are overwhelmingly essential workers, poor people and people of color. In Los Angeles, relative to their share of the population, Latinos and African Americans are contracting and dying from the virus at nearly twice the rate as Caucasians, while residents of high poverty areas are dying at nearly double the rate of wealthier residents.

In our advocacy over the past eight months, we have joined Governor Newsom and the Legislature to lobby for federal COVID-19 relief; supported the Administration and the Legislature's efforts to provide PPE for schools; lobbied for COVID testing and tracing of students and school employees; advocated for comprehensive, transparent and accountable school safety plans; availability and accessibility of COVID-related data; ventilation systems; and additional funding for schools to account for COVID-related costs for reopening. You can read our previous letters sent on July 8, August 13 and September 16.

While we were encouraged by the allocation of CARES Act funding for schools and PPE allocations by the Governor and the Legislature in the 2020 budget, we have been discouraged by the lack of accurate and adequate reporting of outbreaks in schools that are currently open; comprehensive plans for COVID testing of students and education employees; and data regarding COVID rates among our state's students, as highlighted by recent news accounts (*Politico 12-2-20*, *Sacramento Bee 11-20-20*). California is one of only 11 states that is not publishing information about the virus in schools.

A safe return to schools requires that we let data and community transmission rates drive the decision making. It also requires that information including safety plans, transmission rates and testing plans be publicly available so that parents and education employees have the confidence to resume in-person instruction. For months, school districts throughout the state have had the ability to seek waivers to return to in-person instruction or hybrid learning for small cohorts of children including those with special needs. Some districts have secured waivers only to close within days or weeks due to a COVID outbreak among students or staff.

As parents are rightly concerned about the safety of the school site, many are choosing to remain in distance learning – a phenomenon that occurred recently <u>in New York schools</u> with lower infection rates than many California counties. **This raises serious equity concerns, as many non-white families are not ready to send their children back to classrooms due to the harsh and disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color.** A recent national poll showed 82% of Black families, 81% of Asian families and 75% of Latino families supported prohibiting K-12 schools from teaching in person, compared to 64% of white families.

Safety and transparency should not be the minimum standard. They should be our maximum goals. CTA is not alone in this view, it is a position shared and advanced by the superintendents of the state's largest school districts, as well as mayors of many of our state's largest cities. The issue should not be "safe return" versus "education," which is how some are trying to frame the debate. The state has a constitutional responsibility to educate children and safety is embedded in that responsibility.

Recently, <u>Cal/OSHA</u>, in working with the Governor's administration, adopted new standards and regulations that require safety plans for work and school sites be developed and publicly available. We applaud this step forward by the Administration to create safer environments for student learning. Further, the Governor's leadership in securing hundreds of thousands of COVID-19 tests through the Perkin Elmer Lab is another good step as we work toward addressing issues including increased enforcement of existing guidance and more availability of data.

While we have concerns about aspects of the recently introduced Assembly Bill 10, we appreciate the author highlighting the common sense need to keep schools in the most restrictive, Purple Tier closed, particularly as many California counties far exceed the minimum benchmark for the Purple Tier and are at double, triple or quadruple purple rates in the current surge. Again, CTA maintains that schools in communities at Purple levels of transmission and risk should not be open or reopen.

As we all want schools to reopen safely, it is more important than ever that all levels of government work collaboratively and cooperatively in conjunction with school administration and school employees. We encourage you to ask these questions as districts plan for reopening:

- Does your district have a safety plan? Has it been agreed upon by administrators and employees and shared with parents and the community? Is it publicly available?
- Have COVID-19 cases been on the decline in the most vulnerable, underserved communities in your district?
- Does your district have a distribution plan for PPE and COVID testing?
- Has your county and district shared data publicly about COVID transmission rates and outbreaks in any schools that have reopened? Is that information posted on a website or dashboard?
- Have your districts allocated COVID-19 relief funds to support a safe reopening?
- Have you met with district leadership as well as local union leaders to hear from both about their concerns for students and employees?

Safety is not just a today issue. Safety protocols will need to be in place while we wait for, through and even after widespread distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine. Teachers and education support professionals are your partners as we work collaboratively to make schools safe today and for the weeks and months ahead. Our students, parents, and communities are counting on it.

If you have questions, please contact Teri Holoman, CTA Associate Executive Director for Government Relations and Lori Easterling, CTA Manager of Legislative Relations at <u>THoloman@cta.org</u> and <u>LEasterling@cta.org</u>.

Sincerely,

E. Toby Boyd

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c: Hon. Governor Gavin Newsom
Hon. Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond
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