



Joint Statement in Support of Re-Opening Grades K-2 in The School District of Philadelphia

February 9, 2021 (with February 11, 2021 update)

Philadelphia’s young children need to return to their classrooms for in-person instruction.

That sentiment is widely shared by parents, teachers, school administrators, and health care professionals. The data on school-based transmission of COVID clearly shows when schools follow CDC guidance, they can reasonably mitigate the risk of exposure to adults and children alike.

To begin this process, we believe teachers (who do not qualify for health-related leave) must first return to their schools to thoroughly review and assess the safety protocols and ventilation systems for themselves.

This step is essential so that teachers have confidence that they can safely educate their young students. That confidence is best gained by having teachers go to the schools and evaluate the conditions for themselves. We urge the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers to adopt the same mindset and work with its members to get the schools opened.

Where teachers find that the conditions are not adequate, we expect and know they will make constructive contributions to preparing the schools to open. In schools where safety requirements are met, students in grades K-2, at a minimum, must be permitted to return to in-

person instruction. In schools where even the most creative approaches cannot solve the problems, virtual instruction will need to continue until remedies are put in place.

All school personnel including nurses, counselors, food service, maintenance staff, school administrators, and teachers are core team members who can contribute to make this work, where it's possible to do so.

To prepare for opening, the District is asking that some of the most important heroes of this pandemic—our teachers—step up to the plate, yet again, to give children the chance to attend school in person. We support the District's expectation that teachers will respond to that call. The courage and commitment the District is asking of teachers must be met by candor and transparency on the part of the School District's leadership.

- Communication from the Central Office must be clear and accurate to foster trust and confidence. Since not all schools yet have a working solution to the ventilation challenges, the leadership must continually be proactive in releasing data, sharing all relevant facts, and continuing to find reasonable solutions.
- Parents must receive the same information from the Central Office that they receive from their principal. The District can and must ensure all school leaders are on the same page so that parents get one message and are very clear how they can be supportive and how they can advocate for critical improvements needed to enable their school to open for hybrid instruction.
- Facilities and maintenance protocols must be improved. Schools that have been closed since last March should be clean by now and ready for COVID safe sanitizing. District leaders must adopt a policy of “no acceptable excuses” on cleaning practices that are lifesaving during this crisis.

As teachers consider their next steps, we offer the following context:

- Yesterday the City and School District announced the good news that teachers can begin to get vaccinations this month. We applaud public health professionals' wise decision to prioritize the safety of teachers expected to work in schools, many of which have physical conditions that are subpar.
- Last week the School District released its robust testing protocol offering free weekly rapid COVID tests for teachers and students, crafted in partnership with the experts at CHOP.
- The District informed every teacher months ago that they can request leave based on the union contract and state/federal COVID related laws if returning to work would unduly risk their own health or that of a family member they care for.

- Already school employees who are members of the SEIU-32BJ which represents the bulk of the maintenance staff, and principals who are also unionized have been working in schools for months distributing free meals and attending to other student needs. Since no outbreaks are associated with these staff, it is not likely that teachers will be at risk of exposure during the assessment and readying phase for re-opening.
- In Philadelphia, roughly 200 parochial and private schools have been providing in-person instruction for months with 19 known “outbreaks” of COVID. While the outbreaks were in all grades, the majority were in upper grades and wisely the District is prioritizing younger students to return for in-person instruction.
- Across Pennsylvania suburbs outside of Philadelphia, 57 of the 61 school districts are open for in-person instruction in some or all grades. Many of the school districts across the region have substantially more resources and newer facilities than Philadelphia and do not face the same ventilation and sanitation challenges. But there are also districts that struggle nearly as much as Philadelphia with very old physical plants and limited budgets that have found ways to make it work so that some children can return to in-person instruction.

Re-opening schools is not an easy task for an underfunded school district where its leaders are exhausted and so are its teachers. Fortunately, the federal government has released sizable resources that should remove the financial obstacles to obtaining PPE, cleaning supplies, and even hiring extra hands to repair, clean, and provide more services to help children recover from the social and emotional impact of the pandemic, and the devastating loss of learning.

In the months ahead, more must be done to prepare our schools to open for the next school year for all students. Asbestos, mold, and other toxins remain and must be remediated. Leaking roofs and drafty windows must be sealed. Where bathroom stalls are broken or water fountains don't work, they must be fixed. The conditions of our schools even before the COVID outbreak were in a state of crisis.

Right now, the task at hand is making schools safe enough to support hybrid instruction for the youngest students. Nothing should stand in the way of this happening this month.