



Representing faculty
and classified workers in
public and private schools
and colleges, from early
childhood through higher
education

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American Federation of
Teachers, AFL-CIO

July 13, 2020

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor, State of California
State Capitol, Room 1174
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Toni Atkins
Senate President pro Tempore
State Capitol, Room 205
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Anthony Rendon
Speaker, State Assembly
State Capitol, Room 219
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Governor Newsom, Pro Tem Atkins and Speaker Rendon:

California teachers and classified school employees want nothing more than to return to our classrooms and know there is no equal substitute to regular, in-person learning conditions.

But today, COVID-19 presents an invisible, fatal, and long-lasting debilitating threat that is beyond the reasonable bounds of the functions of our public education system. Beyond being a counselor, health aide, content creator, mentor, organizer, rule enforcer, and fundraiser, school employees are being asked to be infectious disease abatement teams. That responsibility rests solely on the shoulders of the State of California to provide the proper resources, and coordinated war-effort-level direction, to create a safe school environment. Current guidelines have been helpful, but the world has changed and the situation in California has gotten worse since these guidelines were written.

Without meeting the scientific requirements to have a safe environment for our students and our staff, schools should not be open for in-person instruction.

Through Executive Orders and efforts of the Legislature, the state endeavored to continue to provide funding for schools in 2019-2020 and establish remote learning protocols, provide meals, and childcare because of the COVID-19 pandemic in California. The 2020-21 budget keeps funding level with last year, avoiding the deep cuts that were initially contemplated. Our schools and communities are grateful for these efforts, but also recognize the inadequacy that only base funding provides, given the scientific necessities to safely reopen schools with the expectation that LEAs “shall offer in-person instruction to the greatest extent possible.” (Cal Edu Code 43504(b)). The situation is getting worse before it is getting better.

As we contemplate the return of having groups of people return to indoor, in person instruction, we are faced with a set of cruel facts:

- The California Department of Education and Department of Public Health have issued guidance, but no definitive clarity, on the scientific minimum requirements for opening safely.

- At the time of writing that guidance, the numbers of positive cases were showing signs of the infection curve flattening – giving some hope for recovery. But now cases are spiking in the most populous parts of the state.
- The state’s Capitol attempted to function safely and securely, using protocols beyond what has ever been expected for school campuses, yet the Legislature is forced to postpone their return from summer break because of an outbreak of COVID-19 diagnoses among legislators and staff.
- Many in our state’s most vulnerable groups, especially communities of color, who also are most negatively affected by COVID-19, are losing work and health insurance – with long-lasting consequences that may be debilitating if not deadly.
- While exponentially more tests will be needed to reopen schools safely, testing sites are currently closing or restricting tests because of shortages in supplies. Results are taking up to two weeks in some cases, reducing their effectiveness of tracing the virus to zero.

The teachers and classified professionals of the CFT demand that science, not political pressure, be used to reopen our schools. Our perspective is based on the [guidance from the American Federation of Teachers](#) that articulates five requirements that must be met to safely reopen our schools, and direct our approach to public education in this pandemic. Local Education Agencies alone are unable to ensure these measures. Only a statewide approach reminiscent of a war effort will be able to ensure the necessary precautions and preparations to keep our students, our staff, and our families safe. Therefore, we call on state leaders to take the following five steps to ensure that our students, our staff, and our communities are safe:

1. **In-person instruction at schools must be prohibited until the number of new cases declines for at least 14 consecutive days.** We demand that the number of new cases, based on adequate and proper testing, be on the decline for 14 consecutive days both in the state and in the county in which a school is considering reopening before it may reopen for in-person instruction. And if this circumstance changes, then the schools in that county or state must cease in-person instruction.
2. **The infrastructure and resources to test, trace and isolate new cases in our schools must be readily and immediately available.** All students and staff that are physically on campus must take regular, state-provided, COVID-19 tests to ensure that no new cases are appearing on campus. A positive test shall require a school to close for in-person education, and the county health office must trace the infection and mitigate future infections. Schools must dedicate space to provide proper isolation for students or workers who have symptoms and until they can be confirmed to be negative for COVID-19 or may be sent home.
3. **The state must deploy the public health tools that prevent the virus’ spread and align them with education strategies that meet the needs of students.** The state must be the provider for proper Personal Protective Equipment and the Local Education Agencies must have the necessary resources for adequate social distancing (including enforcement), disinfection, and

ventilation. Only statewide procurement will ensure enough masks, face coverings, gloves, sanitizer, soap, and cleaning supplies for the proper use for all students and workers that will be on school property for in-person education. Our Local Education Agencies are not equipped to handle the logistical and resource demands to continuously provide the necessary sterile environments. LEA's need clear direction, not guidance and suggestions, about minimum school site safety measures based on science not politics.

4. **The involvement of parents, workers, unions, and community stakeholders in all planning is essential.** It is imperative for a successful implementation that all stakeholders of the education community be involved in planning for in-person instruction, including the requirement that exclusive employee representatives must sign-off on the reopening plan through the established collective bargaining process.
5. **Finally, the state must increase education funding in order for schools to reopen.** The cost to reopen in person, provide a hybrid model of education, or to provide fully remote education simply costs more money than current funding levels. Opportunity gaps must be closed by providing technological equipment and services so that every student and educator can have access to one another. Additional staffing is required to provide the personalized hours of teaching, cleaning, feeding, and socially distanced childcare. There are many options to secure additional funding to provide these safety measures and equity tools.

The state of public education during this pandemic is grim. The Local Control Funding Formula was flat funded. State education spending through the Proposition 98 formula was reduced by \$10 billion dollars. The US Senate Majority leader is refusing to pass additional stimulus plans or a bailout for the American working family. The President states he will cut education funding if schools are not physically reopened despite infection trends. All this, and the California Legislature has not provided a plan to raise revenue to safeguard our schools while California billionaires have made hundreds of billions of dollars in pandemic profits in the past few months.

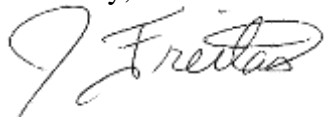
Today, every school district is creating a different plan with different standards, and with different resources, which will allow the virus to pass through weak links in the chain. CFT members are very concerned about the inequality and inequity (that already persisted in our public education system and was exacerbated by the COVID-19 closures) that affects so many of our students. Only through statewide leadership and planning, by keeping schools closed for in-person instruction until all five of these requirements are met, will we have the proper safeguards and quality assurance to continue educating our students and keep the virus from spreading.

Our communities need your leadership and clear direction to ensure these science-based criteria are realized before any public school reopens for regular, in-person instruction. California's children are mandated by law to attend our schools and we insist these sites be safe for them. California should not be in a rush to return to in-person instruction when lives are on the line. As capacity to meet these requirements grows, then in-person instruction should resume on a rolling basis to match that capacity.

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The State of California has a responsibility to secure the health and wellness of every resident. We, the CFT, have a responsibility to our members, our students, and our communities as well. As much as our members await a return to classrooms, until these five demands for a safe reopening are met, in-person instruction should not resume in the State of California.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jeff Freitas". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Jeff Freitas, President
California Federation of Teachers, AFT, AFL-CIO

cc: Tony Thurmond, State Superintendent of Public Instruction