

TO: Joseph Zarra, Interim Executive County Superintendent; Assemblywoman Mila Jasey, Vice-Chair of the Assembly Education Committee; Assemblyman Ralph Caputo, Member of the Assembly Education Committee; Joseph DiVincenzo, Essex County Executive; Sen. Richard Codey; Sen. Teresa Ruiz, Chair of the Senate Education Committee; Sen. Ron Rice; Sen. Nia Gill; Sen. Kristin Corrado; Sen. Joe Pennacchio; Assemblywoman Betty Lou DeCroce; Assemblyman Jay Webber; Assemblyman John McKeon; Assemblywoman Cleopatra Tucker; Assemblywoman Shanique Speight; Assemblywoman Eliana Pintor Marin; Assemblywoman Britnee Timberlake; Assemblyman Thomas Giblin; Assemblywoman Christopher DePhillips; Assemblyman Kevin Rooney and the Essex County Freeholder Board

Out of the more than three thousand counties in the United States, Essex County New Jersey ranks in the top ten nationally for the number of Covid-19 deaths. We mourn for the more than two thousand residents who lost their lives and recognize that each one represents a family that will never be the same. As president of the Essex County Education Association, I represent more than twelve thousand educators across the county and for us the danger that Covid-19 presents is all too real.

For the last several weeks our members have been faithfully participating in reopening committees in our districts. We would like nothing more than to return to our classrooms and offices to educate our students in a safe environment. However, it is clear that the science supports that reopening school buildings this fall is unsafe.

Therefore, the Essex County Education Association cannot, in good faith, support the reopening of public schools for in-person instruction in September. Simply put, despite the best of intentions and planning, the risk to the health and safety of our students and staff is too high.

We know that indoor activities in small spaces for long periods of time presents the highest risk for the spread of Covid-19. Currently, the NJ Department of Health acknowledges that short term, indoor dining is not safe. The World Health Organization now agrees that Covid-19 may spread through the air in indoor enclosed spaces. Just this week it was reported that scientists also believe that Covid-19 may be spread by HVAC units. Enclosed spaces and long periods of time describe the exact conditions in our classrooms. In addition, chronic problems with HVAC systems in our buildings are prevalent across the county even in well-resourced districts. To address just that one issue it would likely take tens of millions of dollars and probably more than a year. This

reflects the magnitude of the problems we face. There are countless other health and safety issues that are equally daunting, including busing and Covid testing and tracing and they come during a time when we are facing budget shortfalls and no guarantee of assistance from the Federal Government.

The other huge issue that makes resuming in-person instruction unsafe is compliance. Small children are not developmentally able to understand or undertake social distancing. It will be an impossible task to keep them apart. As educators, we are problem solvers and inherently optimistic. Just try to teach a lesson on Halloween and you will see optimism personified. But this is not a challenge to be overcome, it is an impossibility. If we open buildings for in-person instruction, make no mistake, students will not maintain social distance and the results may be deadly. For some of our students, compliance with rules is often difficult. Therefore, regardless of age level, the maintenance of safety protocols is utterly unrealistic.

The guidelines from both the NJDOE and the AAP are simply that, guidelines. They are unproven and untested. They cannot assure parents that their children are safe from contracting the virus or bringing it home. The guidelines cannot guarantee that teachers will not get sick and die. In a large-scale, systematic study of 65,000 people in South Korea, results found students between ages 10 and 19 spread the virus **at the same rate as adults**. What are the implications for our middle and high school students, their families, and educators? We have already seen camps and summer schools with small groups, who followed social distancing guidelines and mask requirements, report cases of Covid 19 and close, some within a few days of opening. (see reference page for specific case studies)

We understand that parents want to resume a sense of normalcy for their children. We want that too. But we all need to understand the new realities of classrooms in the age of Covid. As a teacher for the last twenty-four years I can attest that educators have spent the last decade engaged in an effort to emphasize the social and emotional development of our students. Simply put, we understand now more than ever that for students to learn they must feel safe, welcome, and part of the community. How exactly will they do that with desks spaced 6 ft apart? How will they feel as they are constantly reminded to stay apart from their friends, and to not touch their masks, and to not share supplies and keep to their plexiglass “personal space” in the classroom? *How will that work exactly, with kindergarteners?* Many schools will require a “door to door” mask policy. The teacher will be wearing a mask and face shield. One to one help will be restricted under the guidelines. Group work and labs with shared supplies will not occur. The simple gesture of a reassuring smile or fist bump will

vanish. The school day may be abbreviated with students either eating lunch at home, getting a boxed lunch to take home, or eating in their classroom. Going to the bathroom will now require the careful orchestration and logistics of an air traffic controller at Newark Airport. Precious instructional time will be lost to monitor sanitizing and compliance to social distancing and mask wearing. Socially and emotionally every single person--both students and adults--present in these buildings under these conditions will be totally stressed out all the time. Yet, even with all these draconian measures, there is still no guarantee that students will be safe from Covid-19.

Impact on Families

The Essex County Education Association recognizes the severe burden that closed school buildings presents for working families and we did not arrive at this decision to support a remote start lightly. Many teachers are working parents too. However, an intermittent start and stop due to an outbreak of new cases is far more disruptive and unstable than planning *now* for remote learning for all families. While some European schools have opened with limited transmission, schools in China, Israel and South Korea have been forced to close.

Next Steps

We are asking that you recognize the obvious, that it is totally unrealistic to expect that we can safely open our schools for in-person instruction in September.

By declaring a remote start for school in September *now*, this will provide parents time to arrange for childcare and educators to better prepare for remote instruction. Time though, is of the essence. Districts are wasting precious weeks creating plans with convoluted schedules and Plexiglas dividers that are plainly unworkable. Staffing these plans will prove to be impossible. We had a severe substitute shortage *before* the pandemic. Many educators are preparing to leave the profession rather than risk their lives in buildings that they know cannot be made safe over the next six weeks.

Ultimately, once cases of Covid start showing up--and they will--these plans fall apart like a house of cards. Where do districts, families and students end up in that case? Right back in remote learning anyway, but without the benefit of planning and preparation because we were too busy figuring out who is going to be taking temperatures and sanitizing every surface each day.

Educators can use the remaining weeks before school to engage in professional development in effective remote instruction. Administrators can work to provide technology support for those families in need. Districts can focus on public/private partnerships and other funding sources to help their students as outlined by Governor Murphy's initiative, "Closing the Digital Divide." Districts that had successes with remote learning could share best practices with districts that struggled. As always, our members stand ready to work with the communities we serve to help reduce the burden of remote instruction. We are interested in creative ideas that can help working families and support students, but do not put lives at risk.

We are simply asking that as leaders you take the next step and support a remote start to the year so that during this unprecedented crisis we can continue to deliver the best quality education that made NJ schools the best in the nation.

Sincerely,

Anthony Rosamilia, *President* Essex County Education Association and Livingston Education Association

Laura Brutman, Co-President - Essex Fells Education Association

Michael Byock, President - Irvington Education Association

Christopher Cannella, President – Cedar Grove Education Association

Jarrold Cappello, Co-President – West Essex Regional Education Association

Lisa Catanzarite, President – Orange Education Association

Jaime Chavkin, Co-President – Essex Fells Education Association

Michele Cristantiello, President – Education Association of Nutley

Jody Dolce, Co-President – West Essex Regional Education Association

Elaine Elliott, President – Newark Teachers' Association

Kristin Gann, Co-President – Essex Fells Education Association

Matthew Giordano, President – Bloomfield Education Association

Lois Infanger, President – Millburn Education Association

Rocio Lopez, President – South Orange-Maplewood Education Association

Mark Maniscalco, President – West Orange Education Association

James McDaniel, President – East Orange Resource Professionals Association

James McIntyre, President – Caldwell-West Caldwell Education Association

Michael Mignone, President-Belleville Education Association

Dawn Nichol-Manning, President – East Orange Education Association

Frank Pane, President – Roseland Education Association

Thomas Patierno, President – Essex County Vocational & Technical Education Association

Alice Peters, Co-President – Glen Ridge Education Association

Petal Robertson, President – Montclair Education Association

MaryLynn Savio, Co-President – Glen Ridge Education Association
Kimberly Scott-Hayden, President – East Orange Service & Maintenance Association
Christopher Tamburro, President – Verona Education Association
Jennifer Wien, President – East Orange Charter School Education Association

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