



PHILADELPHIA
FEDERATION of TEACHERS

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Written Testimony Submission

PA House Democratic Policy Committee

Topic: Safe and Healthy Back to School

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Introduction

As we continue navigating the deadliest pandemic any of us has ever seen, I want to thank Representatives Fielder and Isaacson for hosting this important hearing. I am pleased to offer written testimony outlining a number of key areas of concern surrounding a full and robust return to in-person learning.

Let me be clear: The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers wants and supports full, five day a week in-person instruction for all students. And we need to ensure the safety of students and staff. With the Delta variant surging, we cannot let our pandemic fatigue and desire to return to “normal” allow us to collectively shirk our responsibility to keep our communities safe from this virus. The desire to ensure the safety of all of our young people and the educators who serve them should not be a partisan issue.

And this is exactly why our union has, from day one of the COVID-19 crisis, looked towards real and safe ways to move towards a return to in-person learning. Our underfunded school buildings predated the pandemic and left us behind the curve in bringing students back into buildings. In order for us to be able to meet the mitigation standards set forth by the CDC, Philadelphia had to do more with less.

There are three main areas of concern that I would like to address today:

1. The toxic schools crisis
2. Specific COVID related safeguards, including vaccination, testing, and masks
3. Funding

Section 1: Toxic Schools

The toxic schools crisis in Philadelphia and across the commonwealth is emblematic of just how profoundly the deep seated, systemically racist underfunding of our schools has impacted our students. Our young people, the majority of whom are Black and brown and experiencing poverty, have had to endure conditions that would never, ever be tolerated in wealthier, whiter school districts.

The school facilities crisis is a searing example of this atrocious inequity, and it's exactly why we formed the [Fund Our Facilities Coalition](#) to identify real, workable solutions to the **decades of neglect that have left toxic conditions plaguing our schools.**

Our fight for fully funded schools--ones that are safe, healthy, and free from toxins like lead and asbestos--continues in earnest. In May of 2021, the PFT issued a deep dive report into the scope of, and the real solutions to, our devastating facilities crisis. In it, we provide data, analysis, and searing photos of how this crisis impacts our children and staff. I invite you to read the report in its entirety [right here](#). A copy is attached for your review.

Section 2: COVID Precaution and Prevention

Vaccination

It is imperative that we not forget that the most effective means of stopping this deadly virus is the vaccine. The PFT has championed vaccine access even before its release, and we have continued to urge our members to get vaccinated. Providing information and ways to get vaccinated has been critical. We pushed hard for our members to get access to the vaccine, and were successful in achieving a District-CHOP partnership that offered the vaccine to every District employee. We have since learned that over 50% of District employees were vaccinated through this program, with thousands more likely vaccinated outside of the program.

In order to ensure that we are doing all we can to support the health and safety of our students and staff, the PFT supports the position [outlined by AFT President Randi Weingarten](#), and we are fully prepared to support a negotiated vaccine mandate for staff. This will include important exemptions for medical and religious reasons, and as all items related to working conditions, must be implemented utilizing the collective bargaining process. But again let me be clear: this union has never, and will never, stand in the way of the health and safety of educators and students alike.

Nationally, 90% of AFT educators have been vaccinated, and while we do not have statistics for our members, we are continuing to encourage our members to get the vaccine. We also applaud the District's efforts to get students vaccinated and urge them to do even more. It is also important to remember that PFT members represent only a portion of the entire District staff.

We cannot forget that right now, children under the age of 12 are not yet

eligible for the vaccine. That means that in every single classroom from PreK through 6th/7th grade, the only people that may have been vaccinated are the staff. Ensuring that other mitigation measures are in place will be crucial.

Mask Compliance, Social Distancing

Full mask compliance is crucial. Over the summer, we learned of too many summer programs where mask wearing was not enforced. We cannot be lax here, and policies and procedures to ensure mask wearing are critical.

So too must we continue to engage in efforts to promote social distancing. Though we are welcoming a full cadre of students back in September, we must continue to monitor CDC guidance and efforts around social distancing.

Testing

COVID testing is another key safety measure. In the spring, the District rightfully implemented a robust student and staff testing program. For the fall, however, they have indicated their plans to not test students who are asymptomatic. We emphatically disagree with this recommendation. We are still learning much about how COVID spreads among young people, and so to forgo testing, while tens of thousands of our students are not yet even eligible for a vaccine, is absolutely the wrong decision.

We urge the District to reinstate a robust testing program for students and staff.

Section 3: Funding and Resources

Our fight for equitable education funding continues. And this union will continue our deep commitment to fighting for the resources our students so richly deserve.

There was an unprecedented investment via the American Rescue Plan, but unfortunately, this year's budget left far too much funding squirreled away for a "rainy day," when we know it is raining right now in our school buildings. The budget, passed by the legislature and signed into law by the Governor, left billions in the bank, and failed to fully and equitably invest in our young people. Further, we urgently need for the legislature to move forward on proposals to run all basic education funding through the fair funding formula. These are decisions that will have an enormous positive impact on the lives of our young people.

As we look to invest the billion dollar influx of funds from the American Rescue Plan, the PFT, in partnership with the Fund Our Facilities Coalition, issued a community survey to help shape our collective response to allocating the American Rescue Plan funding.

Over 4,600 respondents completed the survey. Respondents answered questions about their top priorities and were also given the chance to share open feedback.

The **top three identified priorities** included the following:

1. The first priority was **facilities remediation and/or modernization**, with nearly 81% including it as a key priority, and nearly 75% including it in their top three priorities.

2. The second priority was **mental health supports** for students, with nearly 65% including it as a key priority, and 47% including it in their top three priorities.
3. And the third priority was **classroom supplies**, including books and technology, with nearly 57% including it as a key priority, and nearly 32% including it in their top three priorities.

A close fourth was tutoring and 'extra' academic opportunities during the year, garnering over 53% identifying these supports as key, with 31% identifying it as a top three priority.

You can read our full report on the survey [right here](#).

Conclusion

We know that our students benefit immensely from being in school buildings, in-person, with their teachers and school staff. We also know that every child and school staff member needs and deserves to learn and work in conditions that are safe and healthy. And, we know that our students need and deserve equitable learning resources. This union is deeply committed to continuing to advocate and fight for public education.

Thank you Representatives Fiedler and Isaacson for hosting this important hearing, and for allowing us to provide written testimony to outline some of our priorities as we return to full in-person learning this fall.

Attachments:

1. [May 2021 Report](#) on Scope and Solutions of School Facilities Crisis
2. [April 2021 Report](#) on American Rescue Plan Spending Priorities