



October 2020

The Honorable Department of Health Services Secretary Andrea Palm
1 West Wilson Street
Madison, WI 53703

Dear Secretary Palm:

On behalf of the educators of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, I write to express our concern for the safety of our students, their families, educators and communities, as well as our desire to be problem solvers in our effort to equitably and safely ensure that all of our students receive the learning opportunities, instructional services and supports they deserve. No one wants to be in schools and on campuses with our students more than educators, but we need to do so safely. All educators – teachers, faculty, bus drivers, cafeteria staff, custodians, school nurses, school psychologists and more – love our students, our schools and our communities, and that is why we need state leaders to put student safety first. WEAC would like to ensure that, as public schools make the decision around in-person or virtual classes, they answer some critically important threshold questions. Additionally, educators would like to be included in planning discussions and deliberations, as only we can provide our first-hand experiences since the coronavirus pandemic began. Only we can provide the important insights about the needs of our students and how to best equip educators to meet those needs.

Science, Safety and Equity

As educators, we are responsible for safeguarding the health and safety of our students and school communities and ensuring that schools address longstanding inequities rather than compound them. The pandemic has taken its toll on human lives and communities and we justifiably believe schools follow the science and the guidance of infectious disease experts.

Since the start of the school year, we have found that districts around the state have encountered the challenges of teaching while in a pandemic. Whether a district started with virtual learning and continues to do so, or a district started in-person and has had to transition to virtual or some hybrid model, we offer the questions below as key threshold prerequisites before in-person learning takes place. If these prerequisites exist, then educators, administrators, parents and other stakeholders can begin to address the additional resources, tools and strategies needed for the 2020-2021 year and beyond.

Ron Martin, President
Bob Baxter, Executive Director

The Three Key Requirements for the Safe Return to In-Person Learning

ONE

The Covid-19 Pandemic is Under Control in the Community

Experts agree that in-person learning should only occur if transmission rates are low and declining over at least the past two weeks as measured by key indicators such as infection rates, hospitalization rates and hospital capacity. Otherwise, students, educators and entire communities are at risk. Our educator colleagues in other countries that have successfully re-opened school facilities and returned to in-person teaching and learning have first ensured that the virus was contained.

TWO

Protections in Place to Keep the Virus Under Control and Protect Students and Staff

Accommodations: High-risk students, staff and families are protected through appropriate accommodations such as remote learning and instruction arrangements.

Distancing: All necessary steps are taken to maintain six feet of physical distance among all students, staff, and visitors throughout the day including, where necessary, class size reductions, reconfiguring classrooms and readjusting school schedules and traffic patterns. Safe school-sponsored transportation must also be provided including reconfiguring school buses and transportation schedules to allow for distancing.

Deterrence: Strong deterrence measures are in place, including:

- Require everyone wear face coverings, and that the employer provide those face coverings.
- Require that students, staff and visitors wash hands for 20 seconds several times a day and, when not possible, are provided with hand-sanitizer of at least 60 percent alcohol.
- Install plexiglass protections where necessary.
- Inspect heating, ventilating and air conditioning systems and, if necessary, retrofitted or modified to increase air flow, filtration and circulation of clean air.
- Provide sufficient classroom supplies and consumables so all students have their own.

Deep Cleaning: Protocols are in place for daily cleaning and disinfecting of buildings and buses, as well as more frequent cleaning of high-touch surfaces and frequently used areas such as restrooms. Staff are trained and provided the necessary PPE to perform the cleaning and disinfecting tasks safely.

Detection: Procedures are in place to detect COVID-19 cases among students, staff, and visitors, including education on symptoms, requiring those who are sick to stay home, isolation of symptomatic individuals, and closing school buildings to contain potential outbreaks.

Quarantine, Isolation and Notification Procedures: Triggers for school/campus closures to in-person instruction are clear to families and staff. A protocol is in place that provides for notification of individuals exposed in school to someone with COVID-19, for immediate isolation of that person, and quarantines of those who have been exposed. Robust plans exist for continuity of instruction through substitutes or other instruction when teachers or professors must quarantine or when in-person instruction must be closed. During any such closure, continuity of instruction, nutrition and support services for all students must be provided.

Educator and Family Involvement: Procedures are in place to ensure educators and families have a voice in how the return to in-person instruction occurs and how necessary protections function throughout the school year. Potential avenues for educator and family input include district- and building-level health and safety committees and, where possible, collective bargaining.

Monitoring: Health and safety protections are independently enforced through regular, unannounced building inspections by local health authorities and a widely publicized hotline to report violations. Whistleblowers must be protected against any and all retaliation or adverse actions.

Enforcement: Clear policies are established for how protective measures will be enforced consistently, ensuring that disparate discipline of students or staff does not occur.

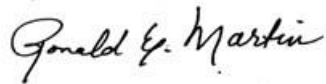
THREE

Plans Are in Place to Ensure Continuous Learning for All Students

The plan for instruction (whether in-person or virtual) must address racial and social equity in the provision of instruction and support services. The plan should include training for educators, families and students on the processes and protocols in the event a COVID-19 outbreak necessitates returning, in whole or in part, to virtual instruction. Again, educators must be involved at each step of the planning process for any form of virtual teaching and learning, including adjusting the curriculum and methods of instruction. Finally, the plan for continuous learning should address device access for every student, high-speed internet access for every student and educator and how technology gaps will be handled.

Safe schools and equity for our communities require decisions based on science and adequate funding. We should not have to put our students and staff in harm's way. We need safe, equitable, and well-funded public schools and colleges – this is what Wisconsin students deserve.

Sincerely,



Ronald Duff Martin
WEAC President



Bob Baxter
WEAC Executive Director