

NEA-New Mexico

Addressing School Re-Entry During the COVID-19 Public Health Crisis

Amplifying the Voices of Education Staff in the Debate on School Re-Opening

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A Note from our NEA-NM President, **Mary Parr-Sanchez**

The National Education Association is the largest network of education professionals in the country. As President of our State Affiliate - NEA-New Mexico, I have the honor to represent thousands of educators across our state. NEA-NM, along with our local affiliates, have spent the months of May, June and July listening to our members' perspectives on health, safety, and school reopening. The clear message we've heard during this unique and challenging time is that educators want a safe and judicious return to school that is premised on scientific data demonstrating that we have the virus under control. As always, educators seek a voice; we want to know that decision-makers are considering our hopes and fears.

Like decision-makers, educators struggle with the tension between keeping ourselves and our families safe and mitigating the costs of our students not being at school. The data in this report confirms that our state's educators are also often caregivers in their own families. They care for their own children, they care for their aging parents, and in many cases, both. Educators are very concerned with compliance at school with mask wearing, social distancing and the avoidance of large group gatherings. Thousands of educators are skeptical that districts can or will enforce CDC and PED requirements regarding safety and hygiene. Statewide, only 22% of staff believe districts are prepared with proper cleaning supplies, staff, and protocols to adequately maintain health standards for virus prevention. Finally, educators are concerned about expending their sick leave if they contract the virus and it takes weeks to recover -- if they are lucky enough to recover.

For these reasons, NEA-NM makes the following recommendations:

1. Learning must remain virtual for the first semester of 2020 until the virus is under control.
2. The NM Department of Health must provide clear and reasonable plans for testing and contact tracing specifically for educators, students, and schools.
3. School Districts must provide clear and reasonable plans for enforcing CDC guidelines and PED mandates. The burden of disinfecting, securing PPE, mask wearing and social distancing enforcement cannot be simply piled on educators as additional job-responsibilities on top of instruction.
4. Re-entry plans must include authentic community, student, and staff voice
5. The state of NM needs to ensure adequate sick leave for educators who contract the virus.

We believe that equity and safety must be seen as complementary, not competing priorities when it comes to reopening. Equity is achieved not by compromising public health guidelines, but by truly investing in adequate PPE and precautionary health measures, and by going further to invest in a bias-free education system that looks critically at its practices and focuses on a culturally sustaining environment. This means more funding to increase the number of community schools, to promote healing-centered and trauma-informed training for educators, to provide technology and close the digital divide, to replace high stakes standardized testing with authentic evaluation, and to empower educators to focus on teaching and learning and relationships instead of top-down mandates. We can get through this together by being strategic - but it will take resources, creativity, trust, and an equity lens.

We appreciate that our state has done many things right over the past several months when it comes to keeping our communities safe and helping to control the virus. Let's respect all the sacrifices we've made and not undermine our progress in this high-stakes struggle with COVID-19.

Executive Summary

NEA-NM represents thousands of educators across the state. A core function of our association is to amplify the voices of teachers, ancillary and classified staff (Education Support Professionals - ESPs). For this reason, NEA-NM and our affiliates have conducted a series of surveys across the state of New Mexico in an effort to connect with educators, administrators, and classified staff (ESPs) on the subject of students returning to the classroom. This document will detail a selection of the results of those surveying efforts, representing the collective voice of thousands of education staff in our state calling for **a safe and judicious return to school that reflects sound science and the real experiences of educators**. Although our members long to be back inside their schools, the results of our surveying efforts shed light on several concerns they wish to see addressed before schools are reopened.

Our confidential surveys found widespread concerns about the **safety, practicality, and fairness** of returning to schools before coronavirus cases in the state are sufficiently under control. Despite asserting their strong desire to return to their classrooms and students as soon as possible, a large majority of educators expressed a **clear preference for remote learning** over either hybrid or fully in-person classes **until the virus is under control and schools can ensure the availability of adequate rapid response testing, contact tracing, and PPE for education staff**. Furthermore, many teachers expressed their skepticism that it would be possible to enforce **social distancing protocols and mask-wearing**, especially among younger students, and were dubious of claims that schools would be **cleaned more thoroughly and regularly**, citing inadequate cleaning even prior to the crisis and years without funding for even antibacterial wipes and tissues in their classrooms.

It is clear that there is significant worry among New Mexico's education staff about the possible danger posed to students and staff in the case of a premature or poorly-implemented return to classrooms. Our surveys also demonstrate that **a majority of education staff are either caregivers of someone in a high-risk category or are themselves in a high-risk category** and would therefore be putting themselves and their loved ones at great risk by returning to an unsafe work environment. In light of such high stakes, we feel it is absolutely crucial that any future plans for a safe school reopening be made with the active collaboration of New Mexico's educators, ESPs, administrators, families, and students. NEA-NM does not believe it is necessary to choose between public safety and economic security - **we affirm that it is possible to undertake a gradual, cautious return to pre-coronavirus normalcy in our schools without putting thousands of educator and student lives at risk**.

Goals of Our Surveys

- 1) To assess the general attitude of educators, classified staff (ESPs), and administrators toward the prospect of returning to in-person classes during the COVID-19 public health crisis.
- 2) To determine the prevalence of education staff at high-risk of complications from COVID-19 or who are caregivers to those at high risk.
- 3) To identify and amplify the top concerns of education staff with regard to returning to in-person classes for the purpose of seeing said concerns addressed by school re-entry planning processes.
- 4) To assess educators' level of comfortability with remote learning practices and platforms.
- 5) To offer education staff an anonymous forum through which to voice their hopes and anxieties for the future of education in our state.

Survey Information

NEA-NM and its local affiliates draw here from four surveys conducted over the course of multiple months, administered to member and non-member staff across the state.

These four surveys are:

NEA-NM Statewide Return to Work Survey

- 245 respondents representing 50+ school districts statewide
- Educators only
- 13 Questions

NEA-Las Cruces & CSEC-Las Cruces Staff Survey

- 1678 respondents
- Educators, ESPs, and administrators
- 33 Questions

NEA-Santa Fe Re-Entry Survey

- 997 respondents
- Educators, ESPs, and administrators
- 11 Questions

NEA-Alamogordo School Re-entry Survey

- 132 respondents
- Educators only
- 6 Questions

Key Findings from Our Survey

Returning to the Classroom

Education staff overwhelmingly wish to see classes held completely or partly online for the entirety of the Fall 2020 semester.

- In our statewide survey, **only 20% of educators wished to see classes in the Fall 2020 semester held fully in-person**, compared to 40% who preferred fully remote learning and 32% who preferred a hybrid model.
- In our survey of Las Cruces education staff, **more than 2x as many respondents expressed a desire to conduct Fall 2020 classes completely remotely as opposed to using a hybrid model.**

Education staff are anxious at the thought of returning to in-person classes

- In our Alamogordo survey, **67% of respondents reported being “extremely” or “very” worried about the impact of the coronavirus on returning to school** - in comparison, only 12% of respondents were either “not so worried” or “not at all worried.”
- Similarly, in our Las Cruces survey, **only 24% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I feel prepared to return to work [in person] on August 5th,”** compared to 52% who disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

“We are teachers, we can learn how to teach online. Curriculum specialists are working with teachers to create lesson plans for online learning... There isn't any good reason to return to school, which places everyone in jeopardy of exposure. We should play it safe for quarter one.”

- Statewide survey respondent

Educators report a growing familiarity and comfortability with virtual learning best practices and platforms.

- In our statewide survey, **educators expressed being, on average, 68% comfortable with virtual learning.**

- In our Las Cruces survey, **40% of respondents felt comfortable with Canvas**, compared to only 29% who felt they were not comfortable with the platform; **a similar proportion reported that training for Canvas was easily accessible.**

“Distance learning helped me become more capable with technology for online learning. Having an online classroom, as a part of my in person classroom, will be a great learning and communication tool.... For example, students who are absent can keep up with their school work. Also, parents can access the online classroom to see how their child is doing with assignments and daily work. Finally, this is a great tool to reduce paper waste at school.”

-Statewide Survey Respondent

Health & Safety Concerns

The majority of education staff are care-takers to someone in one or more high-risk categories or are at high-risk of complications from COVID-19 themselves.

- In our statewide survey, **protecting the health of staff and students at high risk was the top concern for surveyed staff** and **69% of surveyed staff reported being aged 60+, having underlying medical conditions, or belonging to both groups.**
- In our Las Cruces survey, **44% of respondents reported having an underlying health condition that *may or does* put them at an increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19; 83% of respondents reported that someone in their immediate family has an underlying health condition that puts them at increased risk or is over 60 years of age.**
- In our Alamogordo survey, **61% of respondents reported that either they or someone in their household was at high risk.**

Education staff are not convinced it is possible to enforce CDC and PED guidelines among students.

- Our Santa Fe survey found that **91% of those surveyed were “concerned” or “very concerned” with student compliance with CDC guidelines**, including social distancing and mask-wearing.
- In our Las Cruces survey, **65% of respondents reported being “concerned” or “extremely concerned” by the prospect of enforcing safety guidelines**, compared to only 26% of education staff reporting they were “comfortable” or “very comfortable” with the idea.

- In our statewide survey, on average educators were only **32% confident that their school could enforce mask-wearing among all students** and, even more concerning, **59% of staff reported that student and staff bathrooms do not or only sometimes have warm running water and soap for hand-washing.**

“Social distancing and face masks are not enough, especially in the K-2 grades where students are still learning how to wash their hands after using the bathroom, and how to cover their noses when they sneeze....Kids won’t wear IDs or take hats off, [do] you really think kids will wear masks or stay socially distant?”

-Santa Fe Survey Respondent

Education staff do not believe schools can ensure proper cleaning and disinfecting of their classrooms and school buildings and worry they will not have access to adequate PPE.

- In our Santa Fe survey, **80% of surveyed staff were “concerned” or “very concerned” by the cleaning and safety of their work environment; 77% were concerned about having sufficient PPE and cleaning supplies.**
- Similarly, in our Las Cruces survey, **only 27% of those surveyed believed they would be adequately supplied with PPE by their school.**

“Historically, the cleanliness of the building and availability of soap, paper towels, etc. has been tragic. There really needs to be an increase in custodial staff as it is not even close to realistic to expect those we have (and teachers) to maintain the necessary level of cleanliness. I have always done my own cleaning and have had to bring supplies from home as “extras” were not available. I think our custodial staff works very hard, there are just so few of them!”

-Las Cruces Survey Respondent

Work Environment Concerns

Education staff are worried that they will be forced to exhaust all of their sick leave should they or a loved one get the virus or need to quarantine.

- In our Las Cruces survey, **83% of education staff reported being “concerned” or “extremely concerned” by the idea of limited sick leave.**
- When provided a space to list their additional concerns on all of our surveys, **sick leave was one of the top issues highlighted.**

“My wife is pregnant ... Everything that I have read indicates that we just do not know enough about Covid-19 to draw any conclusions as to how it affects pregnant women, unborn babies, and those recently born ... I do not have 40 days of sick leave going into next school year. If I were to use all of my accumulated leave I would still be short the recommended isolation period leaving me with the choice to either go back to school and risk exposing my newborn daughter to Covid-19 before her immune system is fully developed, or taking leave without pay. The second option is further complicated by the fact that I will lose my (and the family’s) health insurance if I choose it. Furthermore, I will be left without any sick days for the remaining 3/4ths of the year. Many of the aforementioned problems would be mitigated by distance learning, allowing me to work from home while isolating to protect my newborn daughter.”

-Statewide Survey Respondent

Educators are concerned that the hybrid (yellow) model proposed by NM PED would force them to work twice as much with the same amount of planning time and pay as prior to the crisis.

- In our Las Cruces survey, **60% of respondents reported being “concerned” or “extremely concerned” with the prospect of juggling remote and face-to-face instruction.**
- **Skepticism at the practicality of preparing materials in two different formats while managing frequent classroom cleanings, mask enforcement, and social distancing was one of the top concerns of educators on all of our surveys.**

“I am concerned about the increase in teacher responsibilities in order to provide effective in-person and distance learning. Our prep time will already be impacted with the additional responsibility of frequently sanitizing our classrooms. This doesn’t include our current responsibilities of preparing lessons for the following week, attending PLCs, attending IEP meetings, meeting with paraprofessionals, and more. Teaching from a distance learning model requires hours of preparation to create videos, [develop] meaningful lessons, and overcome technological issues. The hybrid model is forcing teachers to do two jobs at one time with the same amount of preparation time.”

-Statewide Survey Respondent

Education Staff Input

Education staff do not believe their perspective and experiences have been adequately considered by school districts and other education decision-makers.

- **Overwhelmingly, educators across the state believed that their school district had NOT included enough feedback from teachers, classified staff (ESPs), and families in their health and safety planning for this school year.**
- **In our statewide survey, over 50% of staff expressed their willingness to take action regarding health and safety (refusing to work, contacting the media, or contacting their legislator) should schools reopen before their concerns are addressed**

Recommendations

Based on the results of our statewide surveys, NEA-NM makes the following recommendations to education decision-makers and school districts currently engaged in planning a safe return to in-person classes.

- **Prior to re-opening schools, re-opening the economy, and returning society to normal, we must have the virus under control.** Many other countries around the world have done this successfully. It does take discipline and resources – including contact tracing, social distancing, and broad use of rapid testing. We appreciate our Governor’s commitment to these principles, as we know that while the burden of these measures is high, the cost is multiplied the longer we fail to fully embrace a strategic approach. **Based on our survey results, a majority of education staff in New Mexico do not feel comfortable returning to schools given the current rate of infections in the state - for this reason we recommend that at least the first semester of this school year is conducted fully remotely until the virus is under control.**
- As educators, we have dedicated our lives to our schools and we deeply long to be back in our classrooms. However, prior to that happening **we expect real, tangible, plans from the New Mexico Department of Health on how it will partner with our school districts across the state to ensure the mandates outlined in the PED Re-Entry Plan (page 5) will be carried out effectively.** These plans must include how schools are to participate in rapid response testing and how they ensure social distancing, mask enforcement, PPE, etc. **Based on their years of experience working with children, education staff are dubious about the feasibility of implementing PED-mandated safety guidelines in the classroom, and it is thus necessary to support them with proper planning, training, and extra consideration.**
- **All plans developed by school districts should include provisions meant to alleviate educators from bearing the undue burden of mask and social distance enforcement, intensive cleaning, and dual teaching roles (remote and face-to-face).** It is neither fair nor realistic to expect educators to juggle so many extra responsibilities in order to make a return to school feasible - rather, we must ensure that schools have the personnel and materials necessary to make *teaching* the primary focus of our educators. **Plans should also include detailed extended leave allocations and job protection for all education staff who fall ill to COVID-19 or are forced to quarantine as the result of contact with an infected person while at work.**
- **The plans developed by school districts should have the input of all stakeholders – families, students, staff, and community partners.** It is not sufficient to pretend that having one or two parents on a committee is a sufficient proxy for family or community engagement. Community input should be eagerly integrated. **Plans must be fully accessible, transparent, and vetted by the community.**

Further Reading:

An Arizona Superintendent on Safely Reopening Schools: 'It's a Fantasy'

By Eli Slasow, Aug. 2020.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/08/01/schools-reopening-coronavirus-arizona-superintendent/>

All Hands on Deck: Initial Guidance Regarding Reopening School Buildings

By The National Education Association, 2020.

https://educatingthroughcrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/27178-Initial-Guidance-for-Reopening-Schools_Final-1.pdf

Children May Carry Coronavirus at High Levels, Study Finds

By Apoorva Mandavilli, July 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/health/coronavirus-children.html>

Collaborating in a Crisis: Working Together to Safely Reopen Our School Buildings

By The National Labor Management Partnership, June 2020.

<https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/nlmp-reopening-june-4-2020.pdf>

COVID-19 Planning Considerations: Guidance for School Re-entry

By The American Academy of Pediatrics, June 2020.

<https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>

What Will It Cost to Reopen Schools?

By The Association of School Business Officials International, June 2020.

<https://www.asbointl.org/asbo/media/documents/Resources/covid/COVID-19-Costs-to-Reopen-Schools.pdf>