

NEA-New Mexico

School Re-Entry Report 2021

A Call For Re-entry Only Under The Safest Conditions



A Letter from NEA-NM President, [Mary Parr-Sanchez](#)



As President of NEA-NM - the state affiliate of the largest network of education professionals in the country - I am honored to represent thousands of educators across New Mexico. This is a task that I do not take lightly, all the more so because in the past year my work speaking on behalf of educators has become quite literally a matter of life and death.

For this reason, it is of the utmost importance to me that all educators in our union feel they are being listened to and that their voices are being translated into real action. This report is the most recent in a series of efforts to amplify our members' voices in discussions on COVID-19, remote and hybrid learning, and school re-entry. What we are hearing from our members has remained consistent since the beginning of this crisis: **educators want to return to the gold-standard of in-person schooling as soon as safe and equitable conditions for re-entry can be assured for all students and staff in their school.** While this survey indicates that some educators believe the standards for a safe and equitable re-entry have been met, a majority still believe that they have not. For this reason, NEA-NM supports the advancement of a differentiated system of school re-entry predicated on scientific data, local stakeholder input, and voluntary participation.

This survey confirms that, after almost a full year of working under pandemic conditions, most educators have a clear idea of what it is to work both remotely and under a hybrid model. Educators have adapted and many have excelled despite the challenges of these new approaches to schooling. On the other hand, many of them also report a significant burden on their personal finances, non-contract time, and leave allocations. Educators who have worked at school during the pandemic also describe the difficulty of getting access to PPE and adhering to COVID-safe practices like social distancing and mask wearing. We applaud the considerable efforts of the state to address many of these issues over the past year, but it is clear that the results of these efforts are not consistently implemented across our state. **We therefore call on districts to partner with educators, parents, and all other stakeholders to plan and implement *voluntary* school re-entry procedures that ensure strict adherence to sanitary guidelines, make accommodations in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, and include surveillance testing and vaccinations for all school staff.**

Beyond implementing a *safe* return to schools, it is of the utmost importance that districts also consider how to ensure an *equitable* re-entry. Schools and districts must look critically at their

practices and endeavor to create a culturally-sustaining environment for students. In light of the varied traumatic experiences of students, families, and educators during the pandemic, **more funding must be given to increase the number of community schools, to promote community-based instruction and trauma-informed training for educators, to close the digital divide, to replace high stakes standardized testing with authentic evaluation, and to empower educators to focus on quality teaching and relationships instead of top-down mandates.** Of equal importance, we must help our students to process and heal from the pandemic by treating the subject with the gravitas that it deserves. **Trying to quantify what our students have lost in their learning using a deficit lens will only serve to further marginalize students and the institutions that serve them.** It is better to build upon the (sometimes painful) lessons that the pandemic has provided us about isolation, loss, equity, and access. Students have seen and heard firsthand what this pandemic laid bare, and they will be primary sources for future generations; it is our role to prepare them for that responsibility. **A return to the status quo or attempts to minimize the significance of the pandemic would represent a lost opportunity to learn from this experience and create a more equitable education system for our students.**

Above all else, NEA-NM supports the voices of our members, and we wish to ensure their health and safety, and the health and safety of their students. Many of our members report that over the past year the Governor, NM PED, and school districts have done much to make a safe and equitable re-entry possible, and we wish to recognize and commend their efforts. However, our survey makes clear that there is still much more to be done. **In light of the Governor's recent announcement of a gradual, judicious return to schools, we believe the onus is now on districts to lead a transparent, collaborative local school re-entry planning process that takes lessons from the pandemic experience and puts the health and well-being of educators, students, and families first.**

NEA-New Mexico COVID-19 Member Survey



Executive Summary

A core function of NEA-NM is to listen to and amplify the voices of thousands of teachers, ancillary, and classified staff (Education Support Professionals - ESPs) across the state of New Mexico. As part of this effort, our association regularly conducts statewide surveys in order to connect with our members on topics of relevance to them. In our most recent survey, we returned to the pressing issue of school re-entry, including monitoring the impact of the pandemic on educators and determining the extent to which they are prepared to return to in-person schooling. This survey also serves as a follow-up to the series of surveys conducted by NEA-NM and local affiliates and published as a [report](#) in August 2020.

This document will detail the key findings of our January 2021 survey, in an effort to shed light on the top concerns of New Mexico's educators in the debate on school re-entry. While not intended to be exhaustive or perfectly representative of all educators in the state, we feel this survey does much to capture broad trends and identify areas of special focus. In particular, it is clear that many subjects of concern from our August 2020 survey have not been addressed adequately or consistently by the state and school districts. **Most educators still believe that COVID-19 poses a significant risk to their health and life and feel unsafe working in-person at school.** Subjects of high concern remain virtually unchanged from our previous surveys: inadequate PPE, difficulty of enforcing social distancing and other sanitary guidelines, inadequate training/PD (especially for cleaning and re-entry), poor ventilation, reporting of safety issues, and slow vaccination rollout.

While educators remain eager to return to the classroom as soon as possible under safe conditions, so long as those conditions are not met they have demonstrated their ability to adapt and excel under a remote learning model. However, as was predicted by our previous survey, **remote and hybrid learning models have also placed new burdens on educators**, resulting in significant personal expense and use of personal time in order to meet the novel challenges of the pandemic.

Vaccination for all staff prior to school re-entry remains a high priority for most educators. A majority of educators have indicated their intent to get the COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available to them and have made clear that vaccination would determine to a large extent their willingness to return to in-person schooling. However, a significant minority of staff also expressed unwillingness or uncertainty at the prospect of vaccination, suggesting that **vaccination alone will not be enough to ensure safe re-entry.** Indeed, educators have highlighted the impact of the pandemic on their students, and **many have expressed a resistance to returning to in-person schooling before all or a majority of students are also vaccinated.**

Educators have also called for many additional supports to be implemented in schools prior to re-entry. **According to educators, the top supports/resources needed to ensure a safe and equitable school re-entry are: additional social workers, social/emotional supports for staff and students, physical health services (including additional nurses), smaller class sizes, and extra cleaning staff.** These are just some of the additional supports that must be negotiated between districts, local unions, and other stakeholders as part of a comprehensive localized school re-entry plan. However, **our survey results suggest that in the majority of cases a transparent negotiation and planning process between districts and unions has not taken place, and many educators feel in the dark about what the future will look like for them and their students.**

This survey highlights the many remaining areas of concern to be addressed prior to a widespread return to in-person schooling, a majority of which have remained unchanged since our summer 2020 member survey. **While some areas of concern have proven to be less critical than expected, other problems have shown themselves to be more severe than anyone could have anticipated.** It is also clear that many of these issues are localized and inconsistent across the state, and that the severity of problems in some districts may not be adequately captured by this statewide survey. It is for this reason that we believe **close collaboration between school districts, union affiliates, and other stakeholders is of the**

utmost importance. NEA-NM will continue to support all of our members through continued dialogue and advocacy at the state level, and we call on local education leaders to take very seriously the concerns of educators and to include them in all negotiations and planning for school re-entry.

Goals of Our Survey

- 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 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 NMPED, school districts, and school leadership.
- 3) To take stock of educators' experiences during periods of remote and hybrid learning, including assessing the extent to which they were able to work under safe conditions and the extent to which their contract rights were maintained.
- 4) To offer education staff an anonymous forum through which to voice their hopes and concerns for the future of education in our state.
- 5) To follow up on the series of surveys conducted in the summer of 2020 by NEA-NM and local affiliates, in order to verify our findings and to track the evolving attitudes and feelings of educators in our state.
- 6) To inform our union's response to plans, implemented by NM Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham and the NM Public Education Department in January 2021, that would allow for a district-led approach to school re-opening.

Survey Information

- Conducted January 7 - 27, 2021
- 3,384 total respondents working in over 60 school districts across the state
 - 2,234 Certified Teachers
 - 1,074 Education Support Professionals (ESPs) (including food service, cleaning staff, etc.) and Other staff (including nurses, social workers, etc.)
 - 52 Administrators
 - 13 Higher Education staff
- 28 Questions, both multiple-choice and open response

Key Findings

Remote Learning

A large majority of educators have worked remotely, including ESPs and Ancillary staff.

- 94% of respondents reported working remotely in the past year.
- For ESPs and Other staff the percentage of those who have worked remotely is slightly lower at 84%.

While experiences working remotely are mixed, they are more positive than negative.

- 45% of educators reported a positive or very positive remote working experience, compared to only 19% who reported having a negative or very negative experience. The remaining respondents reported having a “neutral” experience.

Hybrid Learning/In-person Work

Nearly half of educators have continued working at school during remote learning or have returned to school under some form of hybrid learning model in the past year.

- Nearly 50% of educators reported having worked in-person at school in the past year.
- Predictably, the percentage of ESPs and Ancillary staff having worked at school in the past year is higher, at almost 60%.

While experiences are once again mixed, more educators reported feeling unsafe while working in-person at school than those who reported feeling safe.

- 51% of educators reported feeling not safe or only slightly safe while working in-person, while just 40% of educators reported feeling very safe or mostly safe. Roughly 8% reported feeling neither safe nor unsafe.

Work Environment Concerns

While professional development (PD) offerings for remote learning were considered adequate by a majority of educators, there is still room for improvement, especially where it concerns a return to in-person schooling and cleaning.

- 60% of educators reported that PD offerings for remote learning were adequate/appropriate, however 50% of educators also reported that PD was only sometimes helpful in supporting their ability to reach students.
- Only 15% of educators reported that there are adequate PD offerings on the subject of supporting students during the transition back to hybrid/in-person schooling.
- Educators report significant concern as to the availability of PD/training on the subject of cleaning and disinfecting for both teachers and ESPs.

Remote and hybrid learning have resulted in many educators facing additional monetary and work burdens which at times violate their contract rights.

- 45% of educators reported preparing at-home learning packets for students, often at significant personal expense and during their unpaid non-contract time.
- 34% of educators reported working additional (unpaid) days beyond contract days, and many respondents also expressed dismay at the amount of unpaid time they spent during lunch and break times to prepare lesson plans and connect with students and families.

While the use of personal sick leave owing to exposure/infection with the virus has proven to be less cause for alarm than anticipated based on our past survey results, some educators still had to use personal sick leave for reasons related to COVID-19.

- 5% of educators reported having had to use personal sick leave owing to exposure/infection with the virus. Hundreds of responses from these educators reporting total exhaustion of sick leave due to delayed test results or multiple exposures, suggesting that some educators are falling through the cracks, despite the efforts of PED and districts.

Health and Safety Concerns

A large majority of educators believe that COVID-19 continues to pose a serious risk to personal health and safety.

- 77% of educators reported that COVID-19 still poses a “risk” or “high risk” to their health and life.

Many educators who have worked in-person reported not being provided with adequate PPE by their schools and districts, and having to purchase additional PPE at significant personal expense.

- 44% of educators reported never or only sometimes being provided with adequate PPE while working in-person.
- Of the more than 1000 respondents who reported purchasing PPE at personal cost, the most common items were additional masks, face shields, disinfectant, hand sanitizer, and partitions for desks. The average amount spent was \$60-65.

While responses are mixed, more educators report being able to maintain social distancing guidelines while working at school/under a hybrid model than those who reported being unable.

- 66% of educators reported always or usually being able to maintain social distancing guidelines while working at school.

Educators remain concerned that districts are not being consistent in the installation and monitoring of high-quality air ventilation and filtration systems in schools.

- Across open response questions, ventilation systems remain an issue of high concern among educators. Many report that, despite the best efforts of NMPED, districts are not being thorough or consistent in their installation and monitoring of high-quality air ventilation and filtration systems in schools.

While a majority of educators reported that there is a clear chain of command through which to report a safety issue at school, a significant number say there is not or they are unsure how to report safety issues.

- 66% of educators reported that at their school there is a clear chain of command through which to report a safety issue. However, 33% responded there is not or that they are unsure what the chain of command is in their school.
- Disaggregating the data by district, it is clear that there is significant variation in the percentage of educators who know how to report a safety issue. In some districts, the percentage of educators saying the chain of command is unclear was close to 50%, while in others it was as little as 25%.

Vaccination

While a majority of educators intend to get the COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available to them, a significant proportion are unsure or do not intend to.

- 65% of educators reported that they intend to get the COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available to them. Roughly 20% reported being unsure if they would take the vaccine or not, and 15% said they would not take the vaccine.
- When disaggregated by district, it is clear that educators in some districts are much more resistant to vaccination than in others. In some districts, a majority of educators reported being unsure or unwilling to take the vaccine.

A slight majority of educators expressed their willingness to return to school in-person after being vaccinated. However, many educators reported being unsure if they would be willing to return

- While 53% of educators reported that they would be willing to return to school in-person after being vaccinated, a significant number (35%) reported being unsure. 11% of educators stated that even vaccination would not make them be willing to return to in-person schooling.

Most educators are concerned by the prospect of being brought back in-person prior to all staff being vaccinated.

- 51% of educators reported being “worried” or “very worried” by the prospect of returning to in-person schooling before all staff are vaccinated. Only 29% reported being “not at all” or “not very” worried, and the remainder reported being “neutral”.

A majority of educators believe that it is important to vaccinate all or a majority of students before returning to in-person schooling, aligning with our finding that most educators have had students who were infected with COVID-19.

- 59% of educators stated that it is “extremely important” or “very important” that all or a majority of students are vaccinated before returning to in-person schooling. 20% of educators reported that vaccinating students is somewhat important, while 23% said it was “not at all” or “not so” important.
- 56% of educators reported having had students infected with COVID-19, while 32% said they were unsure and only 11% said they had not had students infected with the virus.
- A number of educators have reported that one or more of their students are experiencing prolonged health effects after being infected, some of which may require special learning accommodations.

Re-entry Plans

Opinion on New Mexico's color-coded framework is split among educators, and its suitability as a basis for planning re-entry is also mixed.

- 28% of educators felt positively or “very” positively about New Mexico's color-coded framework. Similarly, 28% of educators felt negatively or “very” negatively about it. The remaining educators felt neutrally about it.
- Asked if the color-coded framework is a good basis for determining which districts can return to in-person schooling, responses from educators were mixed, with a roughly equal proportion of educators expressing favorability as unfavorability.

A large majority of educators are unsure if their school district is negotiating re-entry plans with their local union.

- Nearly 70% of educators reported being unsure if their school district is communicating and negotiating re-entry plans with their local union. 23% of educators said that their district is, while 6% said that their district definitely is not.

Educators report that additional social workers, social/emotional supports, physical health services (including additional nurses), smaller class sizes, and extra cleaning staff are among the most important supports schools need in order to return to in-person schooling.

- 1,600 educators responded with lists of important support/resources that schools need in order to prepare for a safe and equitable school re-entry.
- Physical health and mental/emotional health support services were the most often cited, followed by smaller class sizes, expanded testing for students, and cleaning supplies/PPE.

NEA-New Mexico Board Member Focus Group on Equitable Re-Entry



Introduction

This focus group of NEA-NM board members was conducted virtually in January 2021 as a complement to the general member survey above. **While great effort has rightfully been invested by state institutions, districts, and unions in ensuring a safe return to in-person schooling, it is the belief of NEA-NM that an equitable re-entry is of equal importance.** For this reason, NEA-NM's board members -- who compose a diverse sample of certified, classified, and other staff from across the state -- were asked to spend time reflecting on themes related to ensuring an equitable school re-entry for educators, students, and families. We believe their responses include many of the most essential supports, resources, and improvements that should be in place prior to re-entry if we hope to address the trauma, growing inequity, and diverging learning outcomes caused by the pandemic.

Recommendations

Equity

NEA-NM asserts that healing from trauma must take precedence over enforcing rigorous academic standards or imposing stressful assessment protocols on students. While it is important that time is taken to assess the academic toll of the pandemic, the return to schools

must begin with a collective effort to process and heal from the varied traumatic experiences of educators, students, and families during the pandemic. Additional social workers and counselors are needed in schools in order to facilitate this process and in order to ensure that no students, staff, or families fall through the cracks. We also believe an expansion of the Community School model across the state could have a tremendously positive impact on the ability of schools to ensure equity after school re-entry.

Assessment of Academic and Social-Emotional Learning

We at NEA-NM believe that, in light of the unequal capacity of students to access learning during the pandemic, it is crucial to ensure that all content from the last year is reviewed before educators introduce new content to their students. Likewise, assessment should have as its main objective to identify and rectify academic gaps and not to punish or stigmatize students who were faced with unfavorable learning conditions. We stress the importance of drawing on educator input when designing and implementing assessment tools. Students and educators should not be overloaded with disruptive and stress-inducing assessments that focus solely on academic outcomes, but rather a small number of assessment tools should be used, and these should also take into consideration the material conditions and social-emotional health of the student.

Family & Community Engagement

NEA-NM calls on districts to ensure that all or most social/emotional supports offered to students also be extended to parents and families, as communities heal after this collective traumatic experience. School districts must engage families in identifying areas of need, and must seek to improve access to supports by collecting and distributing lists of resources to parents and families. Each school should be staffed with parent-educator liaisons with social work degrees who can connect with families in need and work with students who struggle with remote learning or the transition to in-person schooling. We also wish to reiterate the positive impact that widespread implementation of the Community Schools model would have on family engagement, with its goal of engaging communities in their schools.

Extended Learning

Educators believe in the power of extended learning for our students, especially as we work to support students' re-entry into in-person schooling. NEA-NM believes that local affiliates, districts, parents and students must participate fully in the design, authorization, implementation,

and evaluation of extended school and year programs. Authentic teacher-generated assessments should be used to measure student academic growth during such programs, and these programs must be staffed by properly certificated/licensed employees. Laws and policies governing these programs must take into consideration the impact on the community and be in accordance with professional salaries and class size. Employment in these programs must be on a voluntary basis. We believe the most powerful programs provide funding for classroom supplies, as well as money for experiential learning activities which go beyond textbook and/or computer seat time. Partnership with local nonprofit organizations also typically enhances program quality. Flexibility must be provided as to how individual school districts and individual schools within a district can best meet the needs of their communities, parents, and students.

Systems Change

NEA-NM believes that, in addition to processing the trauma of the pandemic, it is also critical that we learn from educator, student, and family experiences from the past year in order to improve our education system. We support the integration of remote and hybrid learning into future models of schooling, especially for students with special needs. We also believe it is of the utmost importance that we assess why some students excelled during remote learning while others stumbled, and use what we learn to change the way we approach in-person schooling. We must seek to create an education system that is reactive and adaptive, and that takes into account the heterogeneity of our student body. In this effort, NEA-NM also applauds the widespread embrace of culturally and linguistically responsive curricula by many districts in the past year, and we urge all districts to continue trying to create an education system that reflects the diversity and rich cultural heritage of students as we grapple with systemic racism in our nation and in our communities.

Educator Voice

NEA-NM calls on all state actors, school districts, and school leadership to elevate and amplify the voices of educators in all discussions related to school re-entry and education reform. Too often have educators been left out of critical decision-making processes during the pandemic. It is time for educators to play a fundamental role in shaping our education system at every level.