



RHODE ISLAND
FEDERATION OF TEACHERS AND
HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AFT
AFL - CIO

To: Joseph McNamara, Chair House HEW Committee
From: Frank Flynn, President, RIFTHP
Date: June 3, 2020
Re: Distance Learning

On behalf of the teachers and school staff represented by the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals, I write to express my support of the House HEW examination of distance learning education. I am proud to be a teacher union leader, having witnessed thousands of my members do incredible work simultaneously creating and implementing a distance learning program for Rhode Island students. Still, there is more work to be done.

On April 29, 2020, our national union, the American Federation of Teachers, issued a “Plan to Safely Reopen America’s Schools and Communities”. I was glad to participate in the process with my colleagues on the AFT Executive Council to create this plan. The plan can be viewed here:

[Plan to Safely Reopen America’s Schools and Communities](#)

It features five core pillars to gradually reopen:

- 1. Maintain physical distancing until the number of new cases declines for at least 14 consecutive days.** Reducing the number of new cases is a prerequisite for transitioning to reopening plans on a community-by-community basis.
- 2. Put in place the infrastructure and resources to test, trace and isolate new cases.** Transitioning from community-focused physical distancing and stay-in-place orders to case-specific interventions requires ramping up the capacity to test, trace and isolate each new case.
- 3. Deploy the public health tools that prevent the virus’ spread and align them with education strategies that meet the needs of students.**
- 4. Involve workers, unions, parents and communities in all planning.** Each workplace and community faces unique challenges related to COVID-19. To ensure that reopening plans address those challenges, broad worker and community involvement is necessary. They must be engaged, educated and empowered.
- 5. Invest in recovery:** Do not abandon America’s communities or forfeit America’s future. These interventions will require more—not less—investment in public health and in our schools, universities, hospitals, and local and state governments. Strengthening communities should be a priority in the recovery.

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For the purposes of this hearing, I want to emphasize two points. First of all, it is essential that school administrators involve teachers, parents, school support staff, and community leaders in planning the reopening of school and the continued use of distance learning. I appreciate the Governor inviting me to sit on a statewide Education Readiness panel to discuss school openings. However, key decision to reopen schools will be made locally. School re-opening will look different in each school district and in each community. I ask the Assembly members to insist that union leaders, educators, and community members are at the table as schools and school districts begin planning how teaching and learning will happen in the 2020-2021 school year. This cannot be cursory informational meetings; the involvement must be comprehensive and substantive.

I also note that we will likely need more resources, not less resources, to reopen schools in a manner that is safe for students and staff. Social distancing, enhanced cleaning protocols, and reasonable class sizes cannot be implemented without resources. I understand the challenges in front of you as you consider a state budget. You must ensure that our neighborhood schools have the resources necessary to safely reopen in the fall by protecting and enhancing state education funding.

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