



August 7, 2020

The Honorable Gina M. Raimondo
Governor of Rhode Island
82 Smith St.
Providence, RI 02903

Commissioner Angélica Infante-Green
Rhode Island Department of Education
255 Westminster St.
Providence, RI 02903

Director Nicole Alexander-Scott, MD, MPH
Rhode Island Department of Health
3 Capitol Hill
Providence, RI 02908

Dear Governor Raimondo, Commissioner Infante-Green and Dr. Alexander-Scott,

We write to you in earnest as representatives of the vast majority of Rhode Island’s educators and education support professionals (ESPs) who want nothing more than to open our school building doors, warmly greet our new students, and return to teaching and nurturing them in the classroom. We all miss our school communities, especially as we have come together in incredible ways to meet the needs of our students during the challenging months of this pandemic. We look forward to returning to the classroom when it is healthy and safe for our students, their families, and ourselves.

Educators and ESPs miss their students and students miss their teachers and friends. Though educators, ESP, parents, and families are eager to go back to school, we are not blind to the challenges of doing so during this confluence of crises: a deadly global health pandemic, skyrocketing unemployment and nationwide economic strife, and the racial inequities in our communities that have deepened and widened in the last several months.

We applaud your collective early leadership in the coronavirus crisis and taking the necessary steps to ensure Rhode Islanders’ health and safety, but we fear that our voices are no longer being heard and our concerns are no longer being taken seriously. Both the National Education Association Rhode Island (NEARI) and the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals (RIFTHP) have said repeatedly and unequivocally that the health and safety of students, teachers, and staff must be the top priority and the determining factors of science and medicine must govern reopening school buildings. Sadly, we have come to realize that our interpretations of health and safety differ from yours.

Through data obtained in recent weeks, we have learned that educators, ESPs, parents, and families share these common concerns about the current condition of the Covid-19 health crisis and the ability of our school districts to safely reopen. NEARI and RIFTHP recently engaged the services of Fleming & Associates to conduct polling of randomly selected public-school parents and one of randomly selected teachers and support professionals regarding their concerns about RI school reopening. Four hundred parents and three hundred teachers and support professionals responded to their respective polls.

Major concerns identified in the survey include:

- 56% of parents and 64% of teachers & ESPs are very concerned about returning to school this fall. (82% of parents and 89% of teachers/ESPs are very or somewhat concerned.)
- 61% of parents are very concerned about their child's health and safety related to Covid-19 if schools reopen in the fall.
- 57% of parents are very concerned about their child riding the bus to school
- 63% of teachers/ESPs are very concerned about being exposed to Covid-19 if schools reopen in the fall. (76% very or somewhat concerned)
- 62% of teachers/ESPs are very concerned about contracting Covid-19 if schools reopen in the fall. (78% very or somewhat concerned)
- 70% of teachers/ESPs are very concerned about infecting family members if schools reopen in the fall. (79% very or somewhat concerned)
- 45% of teachers/ESPs are not confident at all that their school district can maintain the air quality necessary to keep students and staff safe in school buildings. (68% not at all or not very confident)

Parents and teachers and ESPs agree that:

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| • Masks should be required | Parents 60% | Teachers/ESPs 86% |
| • Desks should be six feet apart | Parents 59% | Teachers/ESPs 81% |
| • Temperature checks should be required | Parents 69% | Teachers/ESPs 67% |
| • Handwashing/sanitizing required | Parents 88% | Teachers/ESPs 93% |

Based on this data and the numerous concerns stated throughout this letter, we are calling for the 2020-2021 school year to begin with distance learning starting no earlier than September 9, 2020.

Protecting the safety of Rhode Island educators, ESPs, students, families, and our surrounding communities requires this action. We believe it is the right approach and will allow time for further evaluation of health matrices, stakeholder input, and the educational needs of students on a district-by-district basis to allow for a transition to a hybrid learning model after the year begins and possibly a mostly in-person model later in the school year if and when it is safe.

We are all familiar with the risks: bringing together high numbers of people in enclosed, inconsistently ventilated, indoor spaces for hours at a time; the lack of widely available personal protective equipment (PPE) and rapid testing for educators and students; the challenges in ensuring that all students and staff are wearing masks, washing hands, and maintaining social distance at all times; and, so much that we do not know or understand about the virus and that is seemingly constantly updated by new scientific studies.

Your goal to mitigate these risks is admirable, but your administration has set unrealistic and unfair deadlines on districts and families. Teams of district educators have been working diligently with their School Administration throughout the state on re-entry plans since June. Despite the constant pleas from the public to give us guidance, you have stubbornly chosen to wait until August 17 to issue a final back-to-school announcement rendering much of their work useless. This valuable time could have been better spent honing our skills to better develop a distance learning model.

Districts have forced families to make an agonizing long-term commitment to in-school or distance learning weeks prior to your scheduled decision, without a full understanding of what a school day would look like, and without the oft-mentioned and much-anticipated Department of Health protocol playbook.

School buildings across the country have reopened their doors to less than stellar results. Communities in Georgia, Mississippi, Indiana and more have already experienced positive test results, exposures, and quarantines of classes of students and hundreds of educators and staff. Here in Rhode Island, just weeks before school is to begin, we are trending in the wrong direction. In the coronavirus press conference on August 5, Governor Raimondo said, "Our numbers are creeping up, there's no doubt about it, and we could be doing better with our social distancing and mask wearing." Our neighbors New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts have placed restrictions on our ability to travel into their states. We are still in a declared state of emergency, and we have been reduced to social gatherings of 15 people while remaining in an extended Phase III of reopening.

Not insignificant amongst our concerns, is the fact that Phase III is due to expire just three days prior to the start of school, which despite the continued incidence of community spread, is stunningly and seemingly set in stone for a full return on August 31. Adding further frustration and confusion, the relatively new suggestion that some communities could reopen their doors while others cannot is an implausible proposal for a state of our size with such tightly interconnected communities – not to mention deepening the district-by-district inequities.

Our concerns extend far beyond where we are in the phased reopening. We continue to hear the words health and safety from your administration, but the behavior and conflicting messages emerging in the race to reopen offer cold comfort. Suspending bus driver regulations (*Executive Order 20-62*) such as annual retraining and written examinations to expedite recertifications is the most recent troubling development.

We do not know if or how personal protective equipment (PPE) will be provided to educators and ESPs. In June, CARES Act funding was assured to districts for PPE and other safety requirements. In the August 5 press conference, the governor said, "for instance if a school for whatever reason is in a community with a low incidence rate, but hasn't done a good enough job getting cleaning supplies and PPE and securing transportation then RIDE might not be able to sign off on it. So, we are just pushing them to do the necessary work and we want to support them." Will funding be disbursed? Who purchases the PPE? Will districts be forced to turn to the global market in the same way the federal government abandoned states to do the same?

School building air quality remains a critical safety consideration in every district that must be addressed. Buildings were barely adequate before the shutdown. Proper ventilation and air flow are essential to ensure the mitigation of dispersing viral particles. If windows do not open, fans are not permitted, and the HVAC system is antiquated, what is the remedy? Many experts recommend opening doors to increase air flow which nullifies the school safety protocols recently adopted. It is unclear if and when every classroom will be inspected by the Department of Health as is required by law.

While the August 5 press conference unveiled a plan for testing, the governor said she is "hopeful" it will reach the promise of thousands of tests per day with a necessary 48-hour turnaround. In this race to reopen, three weeks before school is asking a great deal of hope and promise.

Current lengthy delays in obtaining test results make testing relatively ineffective. In our schools, windows do not open, bathrooms lack hot water and soap, ventilation systems need upgrading, and nurses treat sick students in converted closets with no room for social distancing.

This is especially true in our schools and communities that are predominantly Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous, where structural racism and years of disinvestment mean that students and their families have higher levels of pre-existing health conditions that put them at greater risk from Covid-19, while their schools have fewer resources to protect them.

About the virus specifically there's still much we do not know: How long does the presence of antibodies confer immunity? What percentage of the population has the antibodies present (recovered)? What percentage of the population is infected currently? What percentage of the population is susceptible to infection?

About the virus specifically, here's what we know to be true: Rhode Island experienced spikes two weeks after Easter weekend and two weeks after the Fourth of July. We have a three-day weekend upcoming on August 10 and another on September 7. Why are we taking this risk with our children and our educators and ESPs?

As stated above, we are calling for the 2020-2021 school year to begin with distance learning starting no earlier than September 9, 2020.

Making this decision now would give every district at least four weeks to plan and troubleshoot around one known and understood model of learning. Exceptions to this should be made for limited student populations for whom equity concerns around extended distance learning are greatest.

When districts can have a laser focus on one model, they can better concentrate their resources and work with educators and stakeholders to be successful with distance learning for all students. This reopening model would allow districts to resolve the inequities of the digital divide that were laid bare this spring. Additionally, focusing on a completely distance learning model would allow districts to be better prepared if the state must reverse course and move back into Phase I or a complete quarantine again – as some health experts are predicting – at some point during the school year.

NEARI and RIFTHP educators and ESPs cannot return to unsafe school buildings for face-to-face instruction until districts and the state can meet these necessary criteria to protect all students, families, and educators:

- A statewide Covid-19 R-value that indicates the virus is under control and will stop spreading
- Rapid testing and response are proven and widely accessible
- Successful air quality inspections of every classroom and workspace prior to school opening as required by law and regulation
- Masks required for all students, staff, and visitors
- Social distancing and desks spaced at least six feet apart
- Stable groups of 15 in alignment with current RI social gathering requirements
- Health precautions such as daily temperature checks for students, staff, and visitors
- An adequate and safe means of transportation for all students entering and leaving our schools as required

It was our hope to be standing side-by-side together with you for an agreed-upon announcement about a safe reopening of school that would have served to reassure students, parents, and our members that their health and safety was top priority. But that should have already occurred by now and its time has passed.

We should not – and we will not – accept lower safety standards in our schools than we do in stores, restaurants, bars, and salons. You have said repeatedly that we need time to get this right. If we open our schools too quickly and without adequate safety precautions, the result will be that some educators, students, and their family members will contract coronavirus. Some will recover, some will face debilitating health consequences or healthcare bills that they cannot pay, and some will die. These are stubborn facts. And they are costs and consequences that we must refuse to accept.

The race to re-open schools comes with no prize for first place, but the consequences of failure could be dire.

A perfect solution does not exist. A safe one does. We urge you to support this course.

Our members are dedicated, hard-working, inventive, and resilient. This was proved in March when distance learning was made into a reality in one week. Buildings may be closed, but educators and ESPs never stopped working. We are ready to continue working and are eager to plan a school year that is as safe and successful as possible for all of Rhode Island's students and educators.

Sincerely,



Lawrence E. Purtill
President, NEARI



Francis J. Flynn
President, RIFTHP