



January 7, 2021

Dear Governor Kate Brown,

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been devastating for so many families; so many Oregonians are impacted by lack of employment, childcare, housing, food, and healthcare security. This pandemic has also been incredibly hard on Oregon's educators, who are working tirelessly to create a sense of stability and connection for students in a time of such upheaval. As educators, we share your urgency to get students back into our classrooms. Schools are complex social environments, built around collaboration, relationships, and interaction. The best of what public schools do cannot be replicated through a video call. However, this urgent need to create stability and connection for students does not erase the reality that COVID-19 is still spreading in our community, and people's lives are still at risk anytime we gather.

The statewide metrics which were created under your leadership were meant to be a framework for opening schools to in-person or hybrid instruction based on science and data, not politics and wishful thinking. Your recent announcement, in contrast, pushes an arbitrary timeline for reopening schools, regardless of the level of community spread of the virus and takes the decision out of the hands of state epidemiologists and puts it into the hands of school board personnel who may or may not have any medical or scientific background.

The fact that Oregon's case numbers have remained lower than those of much of the country is a testament to the efficacy of the policies that have been in place -- it is short-sighted and dangerous to use the success of these policies as justification for pulling the legs out from under them just as the vaccine is beginning to be distributed.

As elected leaders who represent licensed educators in our school districts, we have been working with school district leaders on plans to return to in-person instruction. In order for us to be able to return safely, there are several components that we believe are vital in order for our members to return to in-person learning:

- COVID-19 is still spreading uncontrolled and largely untraced in our communities and research is showing that reopening school buildings is the most safe when community spread is low. To reduce the spread of COVID-19, **our staff and students need free and frequent access to COVID-19 testing in each school site, as well as robust contact tracing.** School staff need access to additional sick leave apart from the leave

guaranteed by their union contract to quarantine if they have been exposed to COVID-19 or have symptoms.

- We are optimistic that the vaccines are beginning to be administered to healthcare workers and first-responders. However, by the state's own best-case estimation, teachers and other school staff may not have access to a vaccine for weeks and educators will certainly not be fully vaccinated by February 15th, 2021. We need a clear timeline and plan to make vaccines available for school staff. **School staff must have access to the vaccine and have time for it to be fully effective before reopening schools for in-person or hybrid instruction.**
- We are asking for the **maintenance of the current health and safety protocols in the Ready Schools, Safe Learners guidance** to mitigate the risks of reopening school buildings. No one gains from opening schools for a short period only to have them closed abruptly. It will only cause further disruption to our students' learning if our guidelines are not strong enough to ensure that outbreaks are unlikely to occur.
- We also need **time to continue working with our districts and communities on plans and logistics**. For any plan for returning to in person or hybrid instruction to be successful, it needs to be co-created with educators, and families. We know that school districts are hearing from some families-- we need time to reach out directly to the families most impacted by COVID; those most likely to live in multi-generational housing; and those least likely to have good health care. We must provide time and space for school districts to use a racial equity lens. Time is also necessary to allow dialogue, questions and to offer our best answers in multiple languages so parents and families can make informed decisions.
- In order to open schools safely, **we need increased resources**. Going back without that means returning to the overcrowded and under-resourced conditions our schools have experienced for years. We need significantly increased resources to allow for COVID-19-safe class sizes. We also need school nurses in every building, mental health professionals, academic support personnel, custodians to do increased cleaning protocols, and personnel to support the isolation of symptomatic students.
- As we bring students back in person, there will be a need to continue distance learning, so we need to **continue investing our energy and resources into making distance learning as effective and supportive as possible**. The students most in need lose out when we shift our resources toward in-person learning when so many families, especially those most impacted by the pandemic, are not willing to send their children back to crowded schools and classrooms.
- Educators and families share a concern for the impact that the pandemic and distance learning have had on student's mental health and social and emotional development. Before we re-engage students into in-person instruction, we need thoughtful plans for

the learning environments that our students are returning to. **Return plans need to be trauma-informed, culturally responsive, asset-based, and focused on well-being,** rather than test prep and remediation. Our plans must include waivers from time-consuming standardized tests, which steal valuable learning time and completely miss the mark of what is most important in reestablishing our live school communities.

Governor Brown, your leadership had distinguished Oregon for its relatively low rate of COVID-19, and for that we are grateful. We are unwilling to recklessly reopen schools after working so hard to minimize the impact of the pandemic in our state. We want desperately to be back in physical classrooms with our students -- as soon as we can do so safely, without needlessly risking the lives and health of students, educators or members of our community.

Respectfully,

Elizabeth Thiel, Portland Association of Teachers President  
Jill Golay, Hillsboro Education Association President  
Mindy Merritt, Salem Keizer Education Association President  
Sabrina Gordon, Eugene Education Association President  
Sara Schmitt, Beaverton Education Association President