

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 26, 2021

Rochelle Walensky, MD, MPH
Director
Center for Disease Control and Prevention
395 E St. SW
Washington, DC 20024

Dear Director Walensky,

We write to express our concern for the well-being of American families with school-aged children. A fully remote or hybrid model of K-12 education is straining the mental health of parents, students, and teachers, while simultaneously increasing developmental, learning, and economic losses.

Some schools have already reopened and others have begun the process of reopening, but many schools have either remained closed or decided to cancel their reopening plans. A recently published study by the United States Congress Joint Economic Committee found that as of this school semester, “24 percent of schools remain fully remote, and 18 percent are teaching fully in person. . . the majority of schools (51 percent) are operating under some type of hybrid model.”¹

Research has identified increased anxiety and stress among American families and students due to school closures. So much so, a Pew Research Center survey conducted in October found that 59 percent of parents with school-aged children reported they are concerned for their child’s emotional well-being.² In addition to this concern, school closures have had negative ramifications for the labor force and the economy.

Closing schools has separated students from important learning tools that are used in the classroom, this separation has been found to possibly hinder children’s education and sensory and social development. Further, school closures have led to poorer academic outcomes, which may result in potentially worse economic outcomes later in life. McKinsey & Company has estimated that assuming in-school instruction resumed in January of this year, the average K-12

¹ Joint Economic Committee, United States Congress. “What’s Next for Schools: Balancing the Costs of School Closures Against Covid-19 Health Risks.” (February 2, 2021).

<https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/analysis?ID=33BC87AF-9E6A-4EAD-BAD0-F15B83990663>

² Juliana Menasce Horowitz and Ruth Igielnik, “Most Parents of K-12 Students Learning Online Worry about Them Falling Behind,” Pew Research Center, October 29, 2020,

<https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/10/29/most-parents-of-k-12-students-learning-online-worry-about-them-falling-behind/>.

student in the United States could lose \$61,000 to \$82,000 in lifetime earnings.³ For students who have not yet returned to the classroom, it is reasonable to assume that these losses could be even larger.

As outlined by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in a report published on January 29, 2021, observing the reopening of schools in Wood County, Wisconsin, “K-12 schools can have in-person learning with limited in-school COVID-19 spread.”⁴ Further, throughout the 13 weeks of in-person learning in Wood County, Wisconsin, of the 191 cases of Covid-19 identified in students and staff members, “only seven cases, all among students, were linked to in-school spread.”⁵

Other studies conducted throughout the nation have yielded similar results. In the fall of 2020, 11 school districts in North Carolina with more than 90,000 students and staff were reopened for in-person education for a period of 9 weeks. During this time, within-school transmissions were found to be very rare with only 32 infections acquired in schools and no cases of student-to-staff transmission.⁶ Further, in Mississippi, a case-controlled study of exposures among children aged 0 through 18 years found that in-person school attendance was not associated with increased risk of infection.⁷ These observations have led the authors of a comprehensive study on the safety of reopening schools to conclude that “as many schools have reopened for in-person instruction in some parts of the US as well as internationally, school-related cases of COVID-19 have been reported, but there has been little evidence that schools have contributed meaningfully to increased community transmission.”⁸

Dr. Fauci has affirmed that “the default position should be to try as best as possible within reason to keep the children in school or to get them back to school. . . If you look at the data, the spread among children and from children is not really very big at all, not like one would have suspected.”⁹ Additionally, you recently stated that the “vaccination of teachers is not a

³ Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, and Viruleg, “COVID-19 and Student Learning in the United States.” <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime>

⁴ Center for Disease Control and Prevention. “COVID-19 Cases and Transmission in 17 K-12 Schools – Wood County, Wisconsin, August 31 – November 29, 2020.” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*. (January 29, 2021). <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7004e3.htm>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Zimmerman KO, Akinboyo IC, Brookhart MA, et al. “Incidence and secondary transmission of SARS-CoV-2 infections in schools.” *Pediatrics*. 2021. doi:[10.1542/peds.2020-048090](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-048090)

⁷ Hobbs CV, Martin LM, Kim SS, et al; CDC COVID-19 Response Team. “Factors associated with positive SARS-CoV-2 test results in outpatient health facilities and emergency departments among children and adolescents aged <18 years—Mississippi, September–November 2020.” *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep*. 2020;69(50):1925–1929. doi:[10.15585/mmwr.mm6950e3](https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6950e3)

⁸ Honein MA, Barrios LC, Brooks JT. “Data and Policy to Guide Opening Schools Safely to Limit the Spread of SARS-CoV-2 Infection.” *JAMA*. Published online January 26, 2021. doi:[10.1001/jama.2021.0374](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2021.0374)

⁹ ABC News Politics, Twitter. (November 29, 2020). (Accessed February 18, 2021). <https://twitter.com/ABCPolitics/status/1333059043452211206?s=20>

prerequisite for safe reopening of schools.”¹⁰ This should further instill confidence that the health and safety of American teachers in their classrooms is not dependent upon access to the vaccination.

CDC recommendations released on February 17, 2021 state that schools “already open for in-person instruction can remain open, but only if they strictly implement mitigation strategies and have few cases.”¹¹ With more than 70 percent of nationwide K-12 student enrollment currently falling within the “high transmission” threshold, these recommendations wrongly encourage the majority of schools across the country to remain in or return to virtual-only instruction, even though some of them are already currently offering in-person instruction safely.¹²

Additionally, these recommendations thwart the Biden administration’s goal of reopening schools for in-person instruction, five days a week, by April 30. It will be difficult to ensure that community transmission levels decrease enough to comply with the CDC guidelines before then, despite it being possible to reopen for in-person instruction, five days a week in a manner that scientific evidence has indicated is safe.¹³

In September of last year, President Biden stated that “we need straight-forward common-sense solutions” when discussing reopening schools.¹⁴ The most common-sense solution is to share with K-12 schools throughout the country that science-based information has confirmed schools are currently reopening without serious risk of transmission. For the health, safety, and economic well-being of American families, the federal government should not restrict, discourage, or delay reopening schools. Instead, the federal government should work in coordination with states and local education agencies to ensure that American students return to in-person instruction as soon as possible.

If the reopening of schools is not achieved, American families and students will only continue to suffer, as there will be even larger developmental, learning, and economic losses.

We ask that the CDC revise these recommendations, and urge you and other acting administration officials to work in coordination with, not against, states and local education

¹⁰ Goodman, Brenda. *CDC: Schools Safe to Reopen Before Vaccinations*. (February 4, 2021). WebMD. <https://www.webmd.com/vaccines/covid-19-vaccine/news/20210204/cdc-schools-safe-to-reopen-before-vaccinations>

¹¹ Center for Disease Control. “CDC’s Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools through Phased Mitigation.” (February 17, 2021). (Accessed February 23, 2021). <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/community/schools-childcare/Operational-Strategy-for-K-12-Schools-through-Phased-Mitigation.pdf>

¹² CDC School Opening Zone Tracker. Burbio. (February 21, 2021). <https://cai.burbio.com/burbios-cdc-k-12-red-zone-tracker/>

¹³ Kamenetz, Anya. “If Schools Follow CDC Guidance, Biden’s Reopening Goals Could Be Hard to Reach.” NPR. (February 19, 2021). <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/19/969467560/if-schools-follow-cdc-guidance-bidens-reopening-goals-could-be-hard-to-reach>

¹⁴ “Biden Delivers Remarks on Reopening Schools.” NBC News. (September 2, 2020). (Accessed February 17, 2021). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_PL7JdCpM

agencies so that schools can promptly reopen in accord with the scientific evidence that has signaled it is safe to do so when proper precautionary measures are put into place.

Sincerely,



Michael S. Lee
United States Senator



Joni Ernst
United States Senator



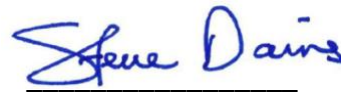
Tim Scott
United States Senator



Ben Sasse
United States Senator



Mike Braun
United States Senator



Steve Daines
United States Senator

CC: Acting Secretary of HHS, Norris Cochran

CC: Acting Secretary of Education, Phil Rosenfelt