



PHILADELPHIA

FEDERATION of TEACHERS

City Council Joint Committees on Children & Youth and Education
Jerry T. Jordan, President
Philadelphia Federation of Teachers

February 17, 2021

Thank you, Chairwoman Quiñones-Sánchez, Chairwoman Gym and all members present for this important hearing to discuss a safe reopening of school **buildings**. I emphasize buildings, because make no mistake, schools are open. Buildings are not. And let me be really clear: educators and students *should* be working and learning in school buildings, because we know it's where the true magic of education happens. There's so much about in person learning that simply cannot be replicated in a virtual setting, no matter how hard teachers and students try—and trying they are. Our educators have embarked upon Herculean efforts to ensure that the needs of their students are met, and students and parents too have doubled down and really given their all.

We know that remote learning will never replicate the in person experience. **But we also know that we're in the midst of a global pandemic the likes of which none of us has ever seen.** A global pandemic that has taken the lives of 3,000 Philadelphians. A global pandemic that, like so much in society, disproportionately impacts Black and brown communities. And we know that even before the pandemic hit, a deeply inequitable system rooted in systemic racism, time and again, shortchanged the children we serve.

The facilities crisis in our schools is not new. It's exactly why we formed the Fund Our Facilities Coalition, which many of you are part of, to identify real, workable solutions to the **decades of neglect that have left toxic conditions plaguing our schools.** Decades of neglect that led SEIU worker Chris Trakimas to lose his life after a boiler explosion at FS Edmonds. Decades of neglect that led then first grader Dean Pagan to suffer lead poisoning after eating lead paint chips from his desk. Decades of neglect that led to a devastating mesothelioma diagnosis for PFT member Lea DiRusso, who spent her career teaching in buildings with known, damaged asbestos. Decades of neglect that led Chelsea Mungo, then a fourth grader at Cassidy Elementary, to write to her State Senator and ask why the color of her skin impacted how her school is funded, and shared with him that she feels like she is in prison or a junkyard when she is in what is supposed to be a sacred place of learning.

I bring all of these searing examples up because we know how woefully our society has fallen short. **And when COVID hit, these inequities were exacerbated even more.** For wealthier, whiter school districts, a reopening plan that is contingent upon unsafe toys held in place by plywood and duct tape, would simply never, ever fly. And unfortunately, the School District has done little to engender the trust of educators, students, parents, and community alike. So, when they say, "trust us," you'll have to forgive us for saying, "show us."

And what we've seen of their reopening plan, all three times, has caused deep concern. It's why, after negotiating a Memorandum of Agreement, we triggered a clause asking for the intervention of a neutral third party. That process is underway.

I want to reiterate our overall concerns with reopening buildings: **we do not yet believe that the District has shown us that buildings are safe for reoccupancy.** Let me be very clear: **this union has never, and will never, stand in the way of student progress or access to education.** We very, very much want schools to be safe for reoccupancy. We hear a lot about children falling behind during the pandemic, and it's exactly why our educators have pulled out all the stops to reach their students. I have seen virtual

culinary lessons, science labs set up in kitchens, experiments taking place on a back porch. I've seen teachers delivering learning materials to their entire classes. Believe me: our educators are working harder than ever.

What we're actually trying to do is make it possible for buildings to reopen in a way that keeps students and staff safe. And quite simply, we do not yet have the information that is needed to make it so. **We cannot, and will not, abide by a plan that relies on promises of safety, incomplete ventilation reports, and fans that in fact pose an electrical hazard and potentially spread the virus.** Further, by the District's own assessment, nearly every classroom in some buildings are deemed as being suitable for zero occupants based on air flow.

In addition to ventilation, I want to address **another key layer of mitigation: the vaccine.** As you know, we have been pushing for educators and school staff to be prioritized for vaccines. If we as a city, a commonwealth, and a nation are truly committed to a safe reopening of school buildings, then we know that vaccination must be a key component. We commend the partnership between the Mayor's office, the District, and CHOP to get vaccines into the arms of educators and staff. We know that time is of the essence, and we are glad that sign-ups for this endeavor will be underway shortly.

I'd like to provide one more example that really illustrates the distrust of the District's safety protocols. In their recent procurement of various materials needed to prepare buildings, they purchased tape to mark off social distancing measurements. And as it turns out, that tape has lead in it. Lead. In an explanatory memo, the District blamed the supplier, but I am including a photo of the tape attached to my testimony, and you'll see very clearly that the tape is marked with a "contains lead" warning. Perhaps you've even seen photos of this tape up on schools—enclosed is a photo of a fan at Patterson elementary, and you'll notice in the room and around the fan, there is a lot of yellow tape. We can presume that this is, in fact, part of this order and may contain lead. **While the tape has been removed, I find it so upsetting that once again, the District has chalked up a really serious error to something done in "good faith."**

I use this example because it is emblematic of so many of the concerns we have regarding reopening school buildings. Our students, and the educators who serve them, deserve a truly transparent process, and most importantly they deserve to be safe when they reenter school buildings. I wish I could report to you that if doors to buildings reopened today, that our students could enter and learn safely. But I can't. And that's the truth. It does not mean that we are holding anything up. We are trying to save lives.

You'll hear shortly from our Director of Environmental Science Jerry Roseman, who can share with you some more of the science behind our concerns around reopening of school buildings. I'd be happy to answer questions you may have, and I thank you again for holding this important hearing today.

City Council Testimony Appendix

Jerry Jordan | February 17, 2021



Lead containing tape installed in schools.

Fan installed, Patterson Elementary

