

Vermont-NEA Task Force Issues Requirements for Safely Reopening Vermont's Public Schools

We are writing as union teachers and support professionals who volunteered to serve on a **Vermont-NEA Task Force** to ensure that your voices, experiences and concerns are an integral part of decisions that will be made by the state and at the district level on how and when to reopen schools. We met for the first time on Tuesday, June 9.

Our mission:

- Provide concrete and trusted guidance to local unions, the Agency of Education, state health officials, school boards, superintendents and principals, the governor and the legislature on how to identify and overcome the many challenges associated with safely reopening public schools for students and their families, staff and local communities;
- Establish guidelines on the proper division of labor for reopening planning and guidance between state officials, including the medical community, and local school Task Forces. What is rightfully and by necessity in the domain of the state, and what is realistic and fair to expect of local school districts?
- Inform Vermont-NEA about the needs of local union leaders and members in the preparation and implementation phases of reopening.
- Address continuity of learning and equity issues – especially racial equity – associated with distance learning and the severe impact the closure of schools had on a substantial number of poor and disadvantaged students, those with special education needs, and those whose first language is not English.
- Assist Vermont-NEA, the AOE and other stakeholders to evaluate progress and to assess the ongoing needs of students and their families, staff, and local communities after schools reopen.
- Help Vermont-NEA, local unions, and community allies organize to expand funding to public schools and social welfare institutions in this time of profound crisis and social trauma, and to reverse a long trend of anti-education austerity proposals and policies at the state and federal level.

What we know

COVID-19 has profoundly and permanently transformed our state, our country, our world. The scope of societal trauma and loss is unlike anything we have faced before. It will take a long time to rebound fully from the pandemic (even after a vaccination is available), to heal the afflicted and broken, to rebuild our health care system, local businesses, and schools, and to give back to our children what was stolen by the virus. This will take more union and political organizing; and it will certainly require deeper and sustained investments in public schools and social welfare programs. Anyone who speaks in the

shadow of COVID-19 of “belt tightening” and “doing more with less” either does not understand the magnitude of the pandemic’s devastation or simply does not care to understand.

We, like you, want to return to a normal school day, a normal school year, and the normal joys, frustrations and challenges that define our professional lives. We want to be in the company of our students – teaching, tutoring, coaching, mentoring, driving buses, preparing nutritious meals, making our schools clean and safe, and, generally, keeping children out of harm’s way. We want the parents/caregivers of our students to be able to return to work with peace of mind.

The fundamental question is this: *Can we keep students, staff, and communities safe, consistent with the best medical evidence, when schools reopen and large numbers of people, mostly children, are suddenly in close proximity?*

The Task Force agreed unanimously that before Vermont public schools reopen for in-person instruction and other activities, the following preconditions must be satisfied:

1. The state must demonstrate the capacity to conduct robust COVID-19 testing and contact tracing and be able to verify that the virus has been sufficiently contained in areas where in-person schooling will be occurring.
2. There must be intensive, pre-opening planning by teachers, administrators, school boards, parents/caregivers, community volunteers, and health experts. The collective problems the pandemic presents can only be overcome by collective problem-solving and solutions. Sadly, too many administrators have not yet convened local Reopening Task Forces, despite calls from local unions to do so.
3. Schools and communities need time to plan before they reopen. In countries where schools are reopening, it impresses us to be the culmination of months of extensive planning and resource allocation by staff, government, and health officials. Some international systems are resorting to staggered openings and alternative instructional schedules. The latter alone, while simple to contemplate, still requires a host of calculations and preparations to do properly and safely.
4. School staff and state agencies must tackle a wide array of issues related to health and wellness, academic requirements and equity, and essential operations and services. Most immediately, schools must determine, consistent with collective bargaining agreements, district policies, and state health edicts, how they will:
 - Conduct routine testing, screening, and monitoring of virus symptoms for students and staff.
 - Establish and maintain strict social distancing rules in all school settings for all students, staff, and visitors, consistent with state health guidance.
 - Establish and enforce recommended hygiene protocols and provide personal protective equipment to students, staff, and school visitors.
 - Respond appropriately and quickly when students and staff contract the virus.
 - Provide nursing and mental health services to students and staff, and establish communication systems with local EMTs and health providers.

- Establish cleaning and disinfecting protocols, and maintain sufficient levels of custodial personnel, cleaning solutions, disinfectants, and equipment.
- Ensure continuity of instruction under pandemic conditions while remediating for learning deficits and trauma caused by the social isolation and inequities of distance learning.
- Conduct food preparation and delivery while maintaining social distancing regulations.
- Monitor student and adult traffic in school buildings while maintaining social distancing regulations.
- Organize and conduct reopening preparation of facilities and for staff, students, and families.
- Develop contingency-distance learning plans if schools have to close again or adopt a “hybrid” instructional model for any length of time (in-person and distance learning combined in some fashion); these plans must reflect the many lessons learned during the recent stay-at-home period (March-June, 2020).
- Structure effective and regular communication between schools and families.
- Develop special protocols for students and staff at higher risk of contracting COVID-19 or at higher risk of experiencing life-threatening complications from the disease.

To the Agency of Education

We will urge the AOE to take these measures immediately, along with others as need arises:

1. Do not “recommend” that school administrators collaborate with local unions, parents/caregivers, and community members. **Mandate it.** Collaboration didn’t happen in many places during the continuity-of-learning phase this spring, with predictable results, and it isn’t happening now.
2. Endorse the preconditions above, and work in partnership with us, our administrators and school boards to achieve them.
3. Appoint union educators and support staff professionals to state task forces. Schools cannot open safely without our collective voice being heard and respected at the planning table. That is not happening at the local level yet, as we said, and we are not confident it is happening at the state level. That is easily rectified.
4. Issue clear, uniform guidance and provide resources on reopening targeted to critical system needs in addition to health and safety:
 - We need state-approved staff trainings on cleaning and disinfecting spaces and property during a pandemic, and on proper handwashing, sanitization, and anti-transmission hygiene.
 - Provide schools with a template for an orientation workshop on reopening for students and families.
 - Design a uniform survey for parents/caregivers that districts can disseminate to ascertain how many are intending to send their children back to school when they reopen and under what conditions, and to learn about other concerns they have.

- Issue uniform guidance on the number of students that should be permitted per square foot of classroom floor space; how schools should deal with parents/caregivers who refuse to enforce safety protocols with their children, like wearing a mask; and how schools should address serious disciplinary infractions by students under pandemic-response conditions.
5. The state should allocate emergency funding to schools to hire essential staff (nurses, custodians, bus drivers, mental health counselors, etc.), to stockpile and maintain adequate levels of protective personal equipment, and to make sure buildings and buses can be kept clean and safe.
 6. Schools, staff, and students must have uniform and timely guidance from the state on these crucial matters:
 - Evaluation standards for the delivery of special education services.
 - The safe use of school buildings as sites of distance learning if another closure period comes.
 - The protection of vulnerable children during distance learning periods.
 - Teaching strategies and resources for children and parents/caregivers who cannot sustain or benefit consistently from distance learning.
 - Standards to prioritize which students should come to school first when in-person learning starts up and not all children will be returning at the same time.
 7. It is the year 2020, and a surprising number of Vermont families cannot access the internet routinely or consistently. The state must solve this problem.
 8. All mandated standardized student testing requirements should be waived.

Parental/Caregivers Survey

In April-May, Vermont-NEA conducted a survey of parents/caregivers on distance learning and related matters. Nearly 1,800 Vermonters responded. The union is undertaking an analysis of the findings. In brief, here is a preliminary reading of the results:

Distance learning is going well for less than half of Vermont's families.

Indeed, while 41 percent of respondents said distance learning was going well for their families, nearly 37 percent said that it wasn't.

Among the reasons for frustration with distance learning, parents cited increased screen time, social isolation, and the demands of juggling work and schooling for their children. More than two-thirds of parents said their top concern was the social isolation children are experiencing. More than half of respondents said their chief concerns were too much time in front of a computer and the demands of work and their children's schoolwork. Nearly 40 percent said that too much time is being spent on schoolwork, almost 30 percent say they have trouble keeping up with communications from their children's schools, and a quarter said their students have too much work.

And almost 15 percent said poor internet connectivity is a major drawback to distance learning.

Parents also report that distance learning is affecting children. Half of respondents say their children are stressed out; 36 percent say their students have checked out, while a third report that children are said. Only 20 percent report that their children are enthusiastic about distance learning.

Distance learning, it turns out, is a group effort. Eighty one percent of respondents said they have one or two students in their house; 19 percent said they have three or more students.

The Task Force will provide more details on this survey as they become available.

The Task Force will be meeting regularly to update their list of issues necessary to safely reopen our schools, and it will continue to identify issues as they arise. It will also continue to monitor the state's efforts on school reopening.

If you have ideas, questions, or concerns, please contact Vermont-NEA President Don Tinney, the chair of the Task Force, at dtinney@vtnea.org.