



PHILADELPHIA
FEDERATION of TEACHERS

To: Pennsylvania House Education Committee
From: Jerry Jordan, Philadelphia Federation of Teachers
Re: Testimony Philadelphia Federation of Teachers
Date: February 23, 2021

My name is Jerry Jordan and I am the president of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, a union that has over 13,000 members. Thank you, Chairman Sonney and Chairman Longietti and all members present for this important hearing to discuss a safe reopening of school **buildings in Pennsylvania.**

I emphasize buildings, because make no mistake, schools are open. Buildings in Philadelphia 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 over 23,000 Pennsylvania citizens. In Philadelphia, over 3,000 citizens have passed away.**

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 the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers serves.

The facilities crisis in Philadelphia 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 in PA, a reopening plan that is contingent upon unsafe toy fans held in place by plywood and duct tape, would simply never, ever fly. **That is why we understand that other districts have been**



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able to reopen while Philadelphia and other city districts have remained closed. We also know that many suburban districts are still teaching remotely to protect students and facility-even when they have superior facilities to Philadelphia.

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 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, like all educators in Pennsylvania, are working harder than ever.

In Philadelphia, we're trying to 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 is deemed as being suitable for zero occupants based on air flow.

I want to address **another key layer of mitigation: the vaccine.** As you know, PFT and other education groups have been pushing for educators and school staff to be prioritized for vaccines. If we as 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.

Students, and the educators who serve them deserve to be safe when they reenter school buildings. We, at PFT, are ready to make that a priority and look forward to when all students and educators can resume a resemblance of a normal school year.

Thank you for this opportunity and I look forward to your questions and comments.