

**TABCO, ESPBC, CASE, OPE and AFSCME's Position Statement on
Returning to School Buildings During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

"Any loss of life from this virus is tragic, but the loss of a child is devastating...."

-County Executive Johnny Olszewski

We as educators love our profession and we would rather be in schools with our students. It is out of our deep commitment to and concern for our students, their families, and our community at large that we the educators of Baltimore County met **virtually** to collaborate in creating this statement. We also know that BCPS and the Board of Education have been involved in the decision-making process on a **virtual** basis due to safety concerns. Clearly, we are all in agreement that it is unsafe to meet in person.

If we reentered the school building at this point, with the current numbers of infection and the rate of COVID-19 spread, the following outcome is what we can reasonably predict:

BCPS reports an enrollment of 115,438 students as of July 2020. Assuming a very low infection rate of 4.8%, that would mean **5,541 students become ill** from COVID-19. Further assuming a very low mortality rate of 2.5% of positive infections, this would result in **138 student deaths**. With the same math, it can be estimated that **529 educators become infected** and **13 educators die**. This is before calculating for higher risk factors such as pre-existing conditions and age.

Furthermore, we cannot ignore the other still-not-fully-understood chronic outcomes from this disease: from blood clot-related strokes, to embolisms, to the terrifying Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children. Of course we must also grapple with the long-lasting mental health impacts.

Our concern is for the health of our entire community, which includes educators and their families, as well as students and their families, with special consideration for those who are medically vulnerable or are otherwise at increased risk.

Right now, there is simply no way to return to the school building safely or fairly.

In response to the proposed hybrid models, we assert that one day in the school building is not meaningfully different in impact from five days in the school building—coming together in large numbers would constitute a dangerous level of exposure. One infection would quickly become a schoolwide catastrophe, which would then certainly ripple out to the broader community. We know this is how the pandemic digs in its heels.

We also recognize the inequities endemic to the current crisis and the critical responsibility we bear in how we choose to respond to it. We know that systemic racism has put Black and Brown families at greater health risk. We also know that poverty and lack of adequate health care compound the devastating impact of COVID-19. We must be holistic in our assessment of what best serves our communities. In our reopening plan, we must use evidence-based strategies to reduce these disparities. In the context of this public health crisis, we acknowledge that learning will inevitably be lost—but learning can be made up. Lives lost cannot be reclaimed.

Furthermore, any unavoidable academic setbacks must be understood to be a casualty of the pandemic and not the fault of educators. In fact, any in-person educational benefits would be diminished because of safety protocols and anxiety levels. We will continue to carry our passionate commitment to our students into the virtual classroom. In partnership, BCPS will be tasked with formulating a comprehensive plan to boost efficacy and equity of distance learning. The longer this decision is delayed the harder it will become to make distance learning effective.

Before COVID-19 struck, we have struggled with the hardship of a massive educator shortage. Now, decision makers must take into consideration that according to a nationwide survey, **20% of staff stated that they would not return** to school in person **and would only participate virtually**¹. We are aware that many educators will retire or resign. A staffing crisis is imminent if we attempt to open irresponsibly.

Until medical experts recognized by TABCO/ESPBC/CASE/OPE/AFSCME confirm that it is safe to do so, we cannot return to our school buildings. As Dr. William Branch stated, **"Our children and our most vulnerable residents need all of us to do our part to safeguard them from this unrelenting adversary."**

Below are our non-negotiable reopening guidelines for protecting the health and safety of all students, educators, and our community. This is not an exhaustive list of expectations and contingencies, but rather a baseline of what must be addressed.

1

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/05/26/polls-20-percent-teachers-not-likely-return-classrooms-if-schools-reopen-this-fall/>

Health & Safety for Staff, Students, and Families

Upon verification from TABCO/ESPBC/CASE/OPE/AFSCME recognized medical professionals that the reopening of schools would not cause undue risk to our most vulnerable members of our community, we as educators demand the following health and safety measures upon the reopening of school buildings:

Protection

- **PPE for All**: BCPS must provide personal Protective Equipment to all students and staff to meet safety guidelines. All persons must wear masks and shields upon entering BCPS facilities.
- **Non-Compliance Procedures**: There must be strict procedures for anyone who does not follow established health and safety guidelines.
- **COVID-19 Testing**: Free COVID-19 testing must be made available to all students and staff and regularly administered by qualified health care personnel. Free testing must also be available within the community.
- **Hygiene Practices**: Training and adherence to sanitation practices must be implemented, including handwashing and the use of hand sanitizer.
- **Cleaning and Disinfecting**: BCPS must provide buildings with adequate hygiene supplies for sanitizing, organizing, and surface cleaning in compliance with safety standards.
- **Physical Distancing**: All students, staff, workers, and community members must engage in physical distancing of at least 6 ft. between individuals at all times in and around all facilities.
- **Temperature Checks**: There must be a system for temperature checks for all people who enter BCPS facilities.
- **High-Risk Educators and Students**: We insist upon the active engagement of high risk populations in any reopening discussions and that BCPS adhere to necessary additional provisions and accommodations for such populations.

Facilities

- **Ensure Safe Air Flow**: Schools should not reopen until air ventilation in all functional rooms (including bathrooms) is consistently at the same quality as that of

an ICU², including portable high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) fan/filtration systems³⁴.

- **Transportation:** Physical distancing must be practiced on school buses by maintaining 6 feet of distance between all individuals, including when boarding and exiting buses. Buses must have high quality ventilation.
- **Water:** BCPS must maintain access to water while preventing transmission through water fountains and water coolers.
- **Mitigate the Spread of Illness:** Establish a standard emergency response protocol to signs of COVID infection. A staff-supervised isolation room must be available for students who have displayed symptoms of illness, including fever, as a place for them to wait until they can go home to a parent/guardian.
- **Communication:** Create a communication system for staff and families for self-reporting of symptoms and notification of exposures and closures as well as safe procedures to check in on chronically absent or disengaged students.

Personnel

- **Contact Tracing:** Develop a robust contact tracing program that prioritizes high-risk communities with the greatest racial, health, and economic inequalities.
- **Nurses** – Implement a 1:750 ratio of nurses to students per building and provide up-to-the-moment training, equipment, and support personnel. Nurses should receive hazard pay.
- **Trauma-Informed Response:** All staff must be trained in trauma-informed de-escalation and on the social and emotional impact of COVID-19 on families. Schools must increase the ratio of mental health support staff to students and have access to grief counselors and crisis management.
- **Sick Leave and Attendance:** BCPS must provide flexible and non-punitive leave and attendance policies for illness of self or family members, for quarantine based on exposure, or for family care.

² <https://www.csemag.com/articles/indoor-air-quality-in-hospitals/>

³

https://www.npr.org/2020/06/17/879255417/amid-confusion-about-reopening-an-expert-explains-how-to-assess-covid-risk?utm_campaign=storyshare&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social

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https://www.ashrae.org/file%20library/about/position%20documents/pd_infectiousaerosols_2020.pdf