



For Immediate Release

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Educators' Survey Finds 'We Need to Be Doing Better' to Protect Student, Staff Health and Safety
Board of Education Union Coalition's poll results back up recent call for more stringent protocols, set stage for "blackout" for safe schools action on Wednesday

Hartford - Since returning from the winter break, Connecticut's schools have experienced rampant spikes in COVID-19--a situation worsened by failure to distribute promised protective gear and home test kits, along with extensive staff shortages. According to a new survey of public school employees, one week later, those concerns still exist.

More than 5,500 teachers, paraprofessionals, school bus drivers and monitors, custodians, nurses and support staff in 169 districts across the state reported that schools are not as safe as they should be. They additionally report a lack of protocols or safety measures in place, including masks and testing. They further believe superintendents should have the flexibility to move to remote instruction for short periods of time without requiring it to be made up.

"It's been a rough start of the year for our education communities," said CEA President Kate Dias. "We thought we were heading back with N95 masks and availability of test kits, but that hasn't been the case, and as our survey shows, many educators and staff members are still waiting for the supplies today. We need to be doing more, and we need to be doing better."

In response to the Omicron variant's continued hold on Connecticut, the Board of Education (BOE) Union Coalition last week urged implementation of nine new, more stringent safety standards and protocols. The purpose was to help keep our school buildings open for in-person learning and safe for our students and staff, a goal supported by Connecticut's public school employees as found in the survey:

- Nearly two thirds of respondents (62%) said they do not have the supplies and protocols in place to feel safe performing their jobs.
- Nearly three quarters (70%) of educators, 64% of paras, and 57% of support staff said they didn't have access to N95 masks and home testing kits when they returned to school.
- More than half of educators said their administrators don't understand the challenges they are facing.
- Seventy percent of educators said the district is not successfully balancing their professional expectations with their social/emotional needs.
- Only a quarter of educators and staff said their district is successfully balancing instructional needs and social/emotional needs of students.
- While educators and staff agree that in-person learning is best for our students, the vast majority of respondents, 88%, believe superintendents should have the flexibility to move to remote instruction for a short period of time, without having to make up the days, to ensure safety in the classroom.

- Forty-five percent of respondents said their building administration did a good job of communicating about N95 masks and test availability and safety protocols for the return to school, but 41% said administrators did not do a good job communicating that information.
- More than a third (37%) of respondents said they work directly with students who can't or refuse to wear a mask.
- The majority of paraprofessionals (84%) said they can't socially distance while supporting their students.
- More than half (55%) of paraprofessionals said they have been unable to fully implement their assigned students' IEP and 504 plans due to staff shortages.
- More than half of paras (58%) are required to use sick time when the district requires them to quarantine.
- Nearly one-third (32%) of paras and nearly a quarter (24%) of other support staff have experienced or expect to experience a loss of income as a result of snow days and remote learning days.
- Forty-three percent of support staff said the administration expects them to work outside their job descriptions without compensation.

"The complete shut-down of school buildings - and even entire districts - because of staffing shortfalls could and should have been avoided," said AFT Connecticut President Jan Hochadel. "Before the winter break, union leaders urged local and state officials to allow remote learning to prevent such disruptions. Nearly nine out of 10 of our members surveyed agree that should have been a tool in the toolbox available to them," she added.

"Being in school has been stressful as we anticipated new protocols, N95 masks and available testing being there for us," said AFT Connecticut Vice President for Paraprofessional and School-Related Personnel (PSRP) Shellye Davis. "Instead, we're dealing with high absenteeism, double digit infection rates and no time to address mitigation strategies. Educators and school staff returned in force trying to figure out how to protect themselves and their students. Yet many were told to stay home - some without pay - because buildings were closed with no plan for remote learning," added Davis, a paraeducator in Hartford Public Schools.

"Recognizing that the transmissibility of this particular variant is so aggressive, we have prioritized the need for the N95, higher-quality mask, that provides more protection," said Stacie Harris-Byrdsong, president of AFSCME Local 3194, representing paraprofessionals, and related staff throughout Capitol Region Education Council schools. "That protection is especially important for our teachers and staff working in elementary schools."

"Vaccination rates among elementary school students are very low, and their opportunity to be exposed is much greater, so having N95 masks is an extra layer of security, an extra layer of protection that is essential to making sure we are all safe," Harris-Byrdsong, a lead educator at CREC, added.

"We all agree that in-person learning is best for our students, but since returning, we have seen a high rate of vaccinated teachers and school staff with COVID, creating shortages of staff in many districts," said Carl Chisem, President of MEUI Local 506. "These shortages have a tremendous impact on our working conditions and on our students' learning conditions. Some schools are combining classes or putting all students in a cafeteria, and that is not conducive to good learning. At this time, districts across our state need to have the right to implement more learning options, including providing short-term remote learning options."

“Our members have worked tirelessly to ensure that our students returned to schools that were safe and successful, but we came back from winter break learning that there was no plan to keep us all safe. There weren’t enough tests, there weren’t enough masks, there wasn’t enough thought put into our safety, despite having received millions to offset expenses to reopen safely,” explained Cynthia Ross-Zweig, CSEA SEIU Local 2001 Paraeducator Council President and Paraeducator in New Fairfield.

“Paraeducators can’t social distance from our students, and many of our students can’t or won’t wear masks. We’re getting exposed, and when our district mandates a quarantine we are forced to use our dwindling sick time. We must do better.”

The survey was conducted Friday, January 7 through Monday, January 10, 2022.

View the Board of Education Union Coalition "Return to School Member Survey" results.

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The Board of Education Union Coalition represents over 60,000 public school employees (teachers and non-certified education personnel) across the state and includes members in the following labor federations and their affiliated unions: AFSCME, AFT Connecticut, CEA, CSEA SEIU Local 2001, CEUI, MEUI, and UAW.

Contact:

- AFSCME Council 4: Larry Dorman, 860-989-9127, ldorman@council4.org
- AFT Connecticut: Matt O’Connor, 860-221-5696, moconnor@aftct.org
- CT Education Association: Nancy Andrews, 860-819-9924, nancya@cea.org
- CSEA SEIU Local 2001: Drew Stoner, 508-404-7515, dstoner@csea760.com
- CEUI Local 511 MEUI Local 506: Kate Sullivan, 203-800-5772, KSullivan@ceui.org
- UAW Region 9-A: Beverley Brakeman, 860-803-6666, bbrakeman@uaw.net