

Informational Testimony regarding House Bill 998

County Boards of Education—In-Person Instruction and Related Services—Requirement

House Ways and Means Committee

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1:30 pm

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The Maryland State Education Association offers this informational testimony on House Bill 998, legislation that would require each county board of education to require public schools within their county to open each school day in order to provide designated student populations with in-person instruction and related services during the 2021-2022 school year.

MSEA represents 75,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland's public schools, teaching and preparing our 896,837 students for careers and jobs of the future. MSEA also represents 39 local affiliates in every county across the state of Maryland, and our parent affiliate is the 3 million-member National Education Association (NEA).

No one wants to get back to school safely and sustainably more than educators. We, the educators working daily with students and families, are painfully aware of the effects of this year's challenges and trauma upon our students—in particular, our most vulnerable students—and their families. We are frustrated by the lackadaisical implementation of, and resources for, safety measures in our schools. We are frustrated by the lack of availability of vaccines after being told how important it is for us to get vaccinated. We want to be back in our schools, safely and sustainably, for our students.



According to a report from the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), as of February 19, eighteen of the twenty-four districts are currently open for in-person instruction for at least small groups.¹ It is worth noting that MSEA has encouraged our members to get vaccinated as soon as possible—doing everything we can to answer their questions related to the vaccine and the vaccination process—and continue to keep ourselves abreast of Centers for Disease Control and Prevent (CDC), Maryland Department of Health, MSDE, and Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) safety and re-opening guideline so that we might aid our educators in their quest to be informed, active participants in local conversations about the safe re-opening of schools and the steps necessary to mitigate and remediate the academic, behavioral and mental health, and social-emotional losses wrought by this extended period of school building closure.

It is widely known that there have been delays and want of state resources to assist local school districts to put in place health and safety protocols and staffing needed to reopen schools safely and sustainably. Over the summer, there was a delay in developing statewide health metrics to guide reopening decisions; guidance that is now all but cast aside in a rush to re-open. The inadequacy of vaccine availability and distribution thus far has been widely reported throughout our state and across the country. In fact, according to data compiled by Oxford University from the CDC, as of February 22, 2021, Maryland has the 12th-lowest level of vaccinations per 100 residents among all the states, just above Kansas and less than half the rate of the states with the highest levels of vaccination distribution.² Many educators are being told that they can now get vaccines only to find no vaccine available to them in their counties.

It is abundantly clear in light of the escalating number of infections, mutations, and deaths that coronavirus is anything but predictable. The risk of infection increases dramatically when individuals are in close physical proximity, particularly indoors, in spaces with poor outside air ventilation, and for extended periods of time. What has

¹ Available online http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/newsroom/_layouts/15/xlviewer.aspx?id=/newsroom/Documents/School-System-Instructional-Status-Form.xlsx (Accessed February 22, 2021)

² Available online <https://ourworldindata.org/us-states-vaccinations> (Accessed February 22, 2021)



also become clear is that school-aged children who are infected with coronavirus can transmit it to the adults with whom they have contact. As a result, a multi-pronged approach of mitigation strategies is necessary to limit the spread of coronavirus in schools. The CDC unequivocally states that “resuming and maintaining in-person learning may pose risks to children, teachers, school administrators, and other staff in the school environment, and their families and household members.” The CDC continues to state that the decision to re-open schools must be weighed against the risks of spreading coronavirus in the school and community. No one should allow a reckless public relations action to outweigh the public health risks.

No one wants to open school buildings safely and sustainably sooner than educators. That will continue to be our focus. We stand ready to work with all stakeholders as well as state and local leaders to reopen school buildings safely, sustainably, and expeditiously. Given that we will be the people chiefly responsible for remediating many of the school-related losses our students have suffered during this extended period of building closures, you can be confident that we prioritize in-person instruction for all of our students, particularly those who are most in need. However, we must be clear. This cannot and should not be done unless their safety as well as ours remains as the top priority.