

Back to School for All: Return, Recover and Reimagine

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Schools must open this fall. In person. Five days a week. With the space and health safeguards to do so. And my union, the American Federation of Teachers, is committed to making it happen.

School is where children learn best, where they play together, form relationships and learn resilience. It's where many children who otherwise might go hungry eat breakfast and lunch. Parents rely on schools not only to educate their kids but so they can work. An astounding 3 million [mothers](#) dropped out of the workforce during the pandemic.

The United States will not be fully back until we are fully back in school. And my union is all-in. I gave a [speech](#) this week detailing the steps necessary to return safely to full in-person learning, including building the support systems to help students recover socially, emotionally and academically, and overcoming the concerns and fears some parents have about sending their children back to school.

We must address those fears. The AFT, with the NAACP and others, recently polled parents of public school students. Only 73 percent of parents—and only 59 percent of Black parents—said they are comfortable with in-person learning for their child this fall. But if the safety and education measures the AFT is calling for are in place, the comfort level jumps to 94 percent of parents, including 87 percent of Black parents. It's clear that mitigation measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus create trust, as does collaboration between schools and families. COVID-19 vaccines have been real game-changers, and it's great news that the Pfizer vaccine has been approved for 12- to 15-year-olds.

My union is all-in. We are pressing for those safety and education measures in schools across the country. And we are dedicating \$5 million to a "Back to School for Everyone" national campaign to connect not just with teachers and school staff but also with families and communities, to build trust and confidence in children returning to school, particularly those who have been learning remotely.

But we must do more than physically return to schools, as important as that is to create the normalcy we crave. We must also put in place the supports to help students recover—socially, emotionally and academically. And we must reimagine teaching and learning to focus on what sparks students' passion, builds confidence, nurtures critical thinking and brings

learning to life—so all children have access to the opportunities that give them the freedom to thrive.

Here are 10 ideas to move us toward those goals:

1. Launch the AFT's "Back to School for Everyone" national campaign to underscore the importance of in-school learning.
2. Form school-based committees of staff, parents and, where appropriate, students to plan for and respond to safety issues and to conduct safety "walk-throughs" in school buildings.
3. Align health and pedagogical best practices by reducing class sizes to reflect the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 3-foot social distancing guidance. Eliminate simultaneous in-person and remote instruction.
4. Offer "office hours" and clinics for AFT affiliates and others to discuss ideas and get technical support.
5. Roll out camps and summer programs that provide academic support, help students get back into routines and encourage kids to have fun.
6. Promote community schools to build trust and remove obstacles to getting kids and families the support and services they need.
7. Increase the emphasis on civics, science and project-based learning, to nurture critical thinking and bring learning to life.
8. Use funds from the American Rescue Plan to fill shortages of teachers, counselors, psychologists and nurses.
9. Launch a federal task force to rethink accountability—how we assess student learning and how to measure what really counts.
10. Engage stakeholders—families, educators and community partners—to ensure funds in the American Rescue Plan and other federal funds for schools are spent equitably and effectively.

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We are all yearning to move forward after this difficult year. For our young people, that means being back in school, with their peers and caring adults, with all the supports they need.

Despite all the divisions in our country, there is a consensus around the importance of strong public schools. That is especially vital now, when we need our schools to provide access to a great, well-rounded education to spark kids' passion for learning and help them recover socially and emotionally.

We have a rare chance to seed a renaissance in American public education. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity not only to reopen and recover, but to reimagine our schools in a way that makes every public school a place where parents want to send their children, educators and support staff want to work and students thrive.



Weingarten speaking at AFT headquarters in Washington, D.C., May 13.

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