



July 15, 2020

Dear Kansas NEA members,

Since March, educators throughout Kansas and the nation have experienced unprecedented uncertainty and anxiety as a result of the impacts of the ongoing global pandemic. As we often remind people, teaching and learning is a unique and deeply interconnected relationship where- despite our best efforts to shield them- students are impacted by challenges their teachers face. Because Kansas educators are deeply committed to the well-being of students, a kind of feedback loop can further amplify feelings of anxiety for both educators and students.

I am deeply concerned as a fellow educator and as the President of Kansas NEA that our educators, like all citizens, are suffering from emotional distress resulting from the impacts of the pandemic on all our personal and professional lives. Medical professionals are actively researching and have reported a very real mental health issue is upon us and is yet one more disturbing side-effect of COVID-19 that can impact anyone, including those who are not nor have ever been infected.

Presently, uncertainty around questions of when and how best to reopen our schools has seen our colleagues expend a great deal of emotional energy. We find ourselves drawing conclusions, taking sides, and entrenching in our beliefs because, quite frankly, we're all more than a little bit unnerved by all of the risks we and our students may be facing. But, let us not be undone by a lack of answers to questions that haven't even yet been asked about circumstances that haven't yet taken place. Instead, let us rely upon our core values, the expertise of medical professionals, and the security of our solidarity in the face of unprecedented uncertainty.

I'm asking you to have faith, but never will I expect that faith to be blind. So let me share with you the positions we are working from as we advocate in your best interest. At the same time, a sense of integrity demands that I share with you something you likely already know. Circumstances are changing so rapidly that we must all remain open-minded and flexible so that we can evolve with the change rather than drown in an effort to swim against it. I pledge to you- our members- that our organization is leveraging the invaluable experience and expertise of our staff and our leaders as we work together to draw the map that will get us through this journey even as we sail through uncharted waters.

First and foremost, we are unwavering in our belief that students, educators, and the patrons in our schools should be ensured a safe teaching and learning environment free from significant risk of serious illness and threat to life. This means schools should reopen only when it is safe to do so according to the medical experts at the Kansas Department of Health and Environment who are guiding Governor Laura Kelly's thoughtful and collaborative response to this crisis. The Governor has pledged that her decisions will be made without concern for political gain and solely in the best interest of the health and well-being of Kansans and we will do everything to assist in upholding that standard.

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Second, educators who are employees of a district assigned to fulfill duties in-person at a workplace should not be forced or pressured to make a choice between their livelihood and their own well-being or that of their family. This means that we expect employers, school boards, superintendents, and administrators will follow the guidance and expertise of the medical professionals at the Kansas Department of Health and Environment and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention while working collaboratively with employees to mitigate risks and issues resulting from this pandemic. Employees have taken extraordinary measures to fulfill their contractual obligations and employers should ensure employee rights are honored. Further, we expect employees will be treated with extraordinary empathy and flexibility needed to mitigate physical and emotional risk during this extraordinary moment in history.

Third, regardless of actions taken by county or city leaders to reduce or eliminate mandated safety measures such as face coverings in public settings or social distancing rules, every school district should enact safety mandates as recommended by medical experts. Doing so expresses a spirit of cooperation and caring for fellow Kansans and reduces anxiety for students who could suffer from peer pressure or bullying around these issues. After all, we mandate the wearing of seatbelts in cars to reduce risk of injury and death, we mandate no-smoking in public spaces to reduce exposure to deadly toxins and we mandate the use of helmets, pads and other protective gear to reduce risk of injury in youth sports. We should also mandate safe, proven protective gear to participate in and to gather safely in our schools.

Finally, we recognize the importance that public schools play in the health and prosperity of our economy. However, schools do not exist for the benefit of private enterprise. Dedicated educators and their students should not be put in harm's way for election-year politics or private gain. More than anything, educators want to be in school with their students engaged in the teaching and learning relationship, but doing so while ignoring the rising infection rates and ignoring the proven measures needed to stem this pandemic only ensures that its impacts will be longer-lasting and more devastating.

Safely opening our schools is so very important for all Kansans and all Americans right now. To do so against science or counter to the best guidance from medical experts is foolish, unsafe, and puts us all at risk. Let us concern ourselves less with **asking "when"** we will safely open schools and more with **answering "how"** we will safely open schools in accordance with medical experts. And perhaps most importantly, let us work together to defeat this virus, and in doing so make certain that our schools will stay open, our citizens will return to work, and we will once again live free from uncertainty and fear.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Farn". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.