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May 6, 2021

The Honorable Rochelle P. Walensky, MD, MPH
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
395 E St SW
Washington, D.C. 20024

Dear Director Walensky:

The New York Post recently reported on the outsized influence teachers unions had over the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) when the agency was developing updated school reopening guidance in February.¹ This report is alarming considering the significant national outcry from parents to follow the well-established science and get schools reopened.

The article notes several emails that demonstrate how American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten was given special access to shape the guidance document that has since been disseminated to schools. One email allegedly notes that the AFT's on-the-ground experience could influence future documents, suggesting an ongoing unofficial role in the CDC's schools-related processes.²

We are concerned about the overt politicization of the process of developing and releasing what should be fact-based guidance focused on reopening schools. At two different Committee on Education and Labor hearings, we invited affected parents to talk about the struggles they have faced due to their schools refusing to follow the science and open their doors.³ Both parents acknowledged the importance of these drastic actions in the beginning of the pandemic, but then noted the outright obstinance they faced when more was known about what was safe for

¹ https://nypost.com/2021/05/01/teachers-union-collaborated-with-cdc-on-school-reopening-emails/amp/?__twitter_impression=true

² Ibid.

³ <https://edlabor.house.gov/hearings/lessons-learned-charting-the-path-to-educational-equity-post-covid-19>, and <https://edlabor.house.gov/hearings/addressing-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-students-with-disabilities>

children. It became abundantly clear to all but cynical political elites that our schools could open safely.

Mrs. Jennifer Dale, a mother of three, noted this in her testimony before the Committee about her daughter:

“But unlike her peers, we quickly discovered that Lizzie’s cognitive delays made online learning impossible. She is still learning site words, learning to type on a keyboard, and learning to use a mouse. The online platform didn’t work to teach her to grip a pencil or correct her answers on a math worksheet. She was confused why the teacher could not hear her or why her peers did not wave hello to her.”⁴

Even when teachers were prioritized for vaccines, Mrs. Dale noted the challenges her family faced in getting her daughter the education and support she needed.

A little over a month after that hearing, the Committee held a second hearing where another parent, Mr. Reade Bush, discussed his family’s struggles with online learning. Again, he understood why schools closed initially, but found it unacceptable that they stayed closed longer than necessary. He is a medical professional, who spoke as a frustrated parent, and implored the federal government to understand the importance of classrooms remaining open for students like his son and daughter.

The statistics outlining the harm to students are overwhelming. Some estimates show that due to persistent school closures, the average student may experience up to nine months of learning loss by the end of June 2021, while minority students could fall as much as a year behind academically.⁵ Further, in Clark County, Nevada, 18 students took their own life over just nine months, leading the superintendent to reopen schools in the district.⁶ Yet, the CDC chose to listen to the politically-connected teachers union rather than follow what their own research was telling them – students could return to school without harm to educators or each other.⁷ Even as the science was becoming clearer about the safety, some teachers refused to return to school, hurting families like the Dales and Bushes. Unfortunately, it took until mid-March for the CDC to revise its overly restrictive, teachers union-approved guidance and admit that only three feet of distance between students was necessary, even though that was known when the initial guidance was released in February.⁸ At that point, students had been out of school for more than a year, causing incalculable harm to their health and education.

It is imperative the CDC rise above politics and focus on the science, including studying virus transmission and the academic well-being and mental and physical health of students. Failing to put students first is a breach of responsibility. To understand what role the teachers union had in

⁴ <https://edlabor.house.gov/imo/media/doc/DaleJenniferTestimony032521.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help#>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/24/us/politics/student-suicides-nevada-coronavirus.html>

⁷ https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7004e3.htm?s_cid=mm7004e3_w and <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2775875>

⁸ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/operation-strategy.html>

developing the CDC guidance, please respond to the following questions no later than two weeks from the date of this letter.

1. What interaction did the CDC have with the AFT and Biden administration officials regarding the school reopening guidance?
2. The New York Post article says the CDC gave the AFT opportunity to provide feedback on the guidance. Please provide the documents provided to the teachers union for comment and the feedback returned to the CDC. Please also include who from the administration, including White House officials, was provided that feedback.
3. Please detail what other groups were provided the opportunity to offer feedback on the recommendations, and provide the feedback received from those groups. Please also include who from the administration, including White House officials, was provided that feedback.
4. Was the office of the First Lady involved in the development of the guidance?

Thank you for your attention to this matter. If you have additional questions or comments, please contact Mandy Schaumburg (mandy.schaumburg@mail.house.gov) of the Committee staff at (202) 225-4527.

Sincerely,



Gregory F. Murphy, M.D.
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Higher Education
and Workforce Investment



Mariannette Miller-Meeks, M.D.
Member of Congress