



Senate Education Committee
Hearing on COVID-19 Protocols in Schools

Testimony of
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Good afternoon Chairman Martin, Chairwoman Williams, and members of the Senate Education Committee. We are happy to be here this afternoon to discuss the COVID-19 protocols for K-12 schools in Pennsylvania. As you know, the Wolf Administration is committed to doing everything possible to ensure a safe and smooth return to school for all Pennsylvania children.

As you know, the COVID-19 pandemic caused uncertainty and disruption for students, families, and school staff. Early in the pandemic, we had limited tools to manage the pandemic. Due to these disruptions, the Wolf Administration prioritized vaccinating teachers, inoculating over 112,500 school staff, to ensure they had the protections needed to ease the return to the classroom. Additionally, with broader availability of testing and vaccines authorized for children age 12 and older, we have more tools available to manage this virus. As such, the focus on maintaining in-person instruction is a core guiding principle for the Wolf Administration, which is similarly prioritized by the Biden Administration. For the 2021-2022 School Year, both the Pennsylvania Department of Education and Department of Health recommend that schools follow guidance published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for implementing safe in-person learning this fall. This guidance is attached with this testimony for your review.

As noted above, this guidance prioritizes in-person instruction by offering strategies for schools to implement safety measures to keep kids, teachers, and staff safe. With that priority in mind, the guidance does not recommend alternative instruction models based on levels of transmission, but rather it offers layered prevention strategies and best practices to safely maintain in-person instruction. Similar to last year, schools are recommended to maintain 3ft of physical distance between classmates. When this cannot be achieved, again, it is recommended to layer additional prevention strategies together – such as indoor masking - to ensure that in-person instruction can be prioritized. While the initial school guidance recommended mask wearing indoors for students over 2 years old and staff who are not fully vaccinated, on July 27th, the CDC recommended indoor masking for all K – 12 students, teachers, and staff regardless of vaccination status. This is due to rising case counts across the country and the threat posed by the highly transmissible Delta variant.

Although schools are encouraged to adhere to the CDC guidance, both Departments stand at the ready to provide schools with technical assistance as they navigate this school year. Further, PDE and DOH have continuously communicated with school administrators throughout the summer summarizing the new CDC guidance and the Departments' recommendation to implement these strategies for the fall. Just as last year, there is no requirement for schools to follow the CDC guidance, but they are strongly encouraged to do so as they represent the best public health recommendation for schools. However, in accordance with the CDC's order on wearing masks on public transportation, masks are required to be worn by school bus passengers and drivers, regardless of any local mask policy or recommendation.

For this year, thanks to significant federal investment, Pennsylvania is planning to offer testing capacity to schools through a contracted vendor being procured by the Department of Health. This testing initiative is voluntary, so schools may opt-in if they choose and this program is offered at no cost to schools. For schools that opt-in, their designated school staff will work with the vendor to offer testing support for the school including pooled testing, individual diagnostic PCR testing, rapid antigen testing, virtual staffing support, onsite staffing support, as well as communication directly with schools and parents to help educate communities on the importance of testing in schools.

In closing, we know that this pandemic has presented many challenges to our students, families, and school staff. It is our hope to continue to work to support schools this school year. Pennsylvanians can assist in this effort by continuing to get vaccinated for our students and family members who cannot yet be vaccinated. We appreciate your time today and are happy to take any questions you may have.