



A Union of Professionals

Road Map to Safely Reopening Our Schools

In-person schooling has always been foundational. It's what makes great public schools central to every community. Educators know that, to thrive, children need in-person learning, and that's why the AFT has been working hard—since April 2020, when we issued our first road map to safely reopen our schools—to get them back in classrooms.

The road map to safely reopen schools for in-person learning is forged by ensuring transparency and building trust with the education community, starting with the safety standards and resources needed to keep everyone in our schools safe. That means reopening plans must be developed with the education community, including educators and their unions, and they must be based on scientific standards that minimize COVID-19 transmission in schools. Teachers and school staff understand that remote learning is not an adequate substitute for in-person learning and that reopening schools is vital for our children's well-being and education, but in-person learning must be safe for everyone.

The AFT reopening plan has focused on six essential pillars:

- COVID-19 testing must become a way of life in schools, and we need to test regularly and rapidly to monitor the virus.
- Proper safety protocols, including masks, physical distancing, cleaning and sanitizing procedures, and ventilation upgrades, must be implemented in every school.
- High-risk teachers and school staff need appropriate accommodations to keep them safe.
- Vaccine prioritization for teachers and school staff should be aligned with priorities for in-person learning.
- Given the new variants, communities need a metric for community infection rates that will trigger increasing safeguards, including temporary closures.
- Safety committees, situation rooms and building walk-throughs build trust and help to abate fear about reopening.

According to a recent poll of our members, 88 percent of educators favor this AFT reopening plan, and 85 percent say they would feel comfortable returning to their classrooms if these recommendations were followed.

Reopening plans in Boston, Chicago, New York City, San Francisco and elsewhere offer proof that by focusing efforts on these essential pillars, we can overcome people's fears, build trust and safely reopen schools for our children.

The AFT believes that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance provides much of what the AFT has proposed. It is an informed, tactile plan that can keep school communities safe by defining the mitigation and accommodation measures, and other tools, educators and kids need.

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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AFT's Plan to Safely Reopen Schools

1. **Robust testing is critical.** We can reopen safely in places with mild to moderate community spread, as long as an effective testing strategy is included in mitigation efforts. In addition to diagnostic testing, robust surveillance testing programs that will conduct random samples of students and staff, along with contact tracing, are essential.
2. **Safe reopening can happen with core mitigation and safety strategies in place.** These include 6-foot physical distancing, universal use of masks and appropriate personal protective equipment, testing and contact tracing, proper ventilation, cleaning and disinfection, and isolation and quarantine protocol. The AFT has consistently posited that safe reopening is possible in communities with low to moderate community spread when these safeguards are in place.
3. **Accommodations for educators and school staff who are high-risk, or who have a high-risk household member, are a must.** Adults working in school settings can have increased risks of serious illness if infected, compared with most students. While there is overlap in the safety concerns for both students and staff, adults have unique concerns—they need accommodations for their personal underlying conditions and for those of family members they reside with or serve as caregiver for.
4. **Teachers and school staff must be prioritized in vaccine administration.** While vaccination of teachers and school staff does not have to be a prerequisite for reopening school buildings where the mitigation safeguards are in place, the CDC's recommendation that teachers and school staff be prioritized in Phase 1b for vaccination is critical to reopening school buildings. Execution of reopening plans, inevitably, will be imperfect, and vaccination of adults working in schools is a critical component of making buildings safe.
5. **A recommended positivity rate threshold must be provided.** As buildings reopen and our mitigation strategies are implemented and tested, inevitable surges of virus in the community must be taken into account in ongoing evaluations of the safety of in-person learning. While a single bright-line number may not take into account the variables in a given community, an objective metric for closure/reopening of buildings is necessary.
6. **Safety committees, situation rooms and building walk-throughs build trust and help to abate fear about reopening.** School districts must counter mistrust and fear with involvement and transparency. It's not only educators and school staff who are reluctant to return, but a large percentage of students and families remain fearful of exposure. Only genuine, active involvement of these key stakeholders in monitoring the situation, ensuring mitigation strategies are in place, and making decisions to close and reopen schools, will be an antidote to that pushback.

Visit [AFT.org](https://www.aft.org) to read more about the AFT's blueprint for reopening schools, originally issued last April, and to see case studies on reopening plans across the country.