

AEA Statement on Reopening, 7/30/20

Thank you for the chance to speak tonight. After the most stressful school year of our careers, this has not been a restful summer for our educators. Waiting for other people to make decisions with such impact on our lives is nerve-wracking. Instead of vacation, this has been a summer of fear, frustration, and mourning the loss of so much of what we love about our jobs. We have been working hard, studying virtual classroom pedagogy, redesigning curriculum, and becoming amateur architects, engineers, and epidemiologists, reading every article published that might help understand what fall will look like. As the AEA surveyed and met with our members, the following became clear to our Board of Directors.

We, the AEA, reject the all-in-building plan to reopening schools. While we recognize that the WHO and American Association of Pediatrics has stated that students may sit 3 feet apart in class, we don't believe that reaching only the bare minimum of safety standards is acceptable. Would any of you buy a car that just barely passed the safety inspection? I wouldn't. Would you put your child in a carseat with terrible safety ratings because it is legally safe enough to be sold? I doubt it, if you had any other options. We have other options. The idea that we should take the lowest bar for safety is unacceptable for the children in this town, and for the staff who work with them. Every other piece of guidance defines this plan- 8 people per 1000 ft for indoor occupancy, 50% occupancy for buildings, indoor gatherings limited to 25 people, 6 feet of social distance. **We care too much about our community to accept this risk.**

The safest option for this fall is to continue schools remotely. For many that is a hard pill to swallow. We grieve the loss of contact with our students, and we worry for those who don't engage. We see the strain it puts on families. Many teachers are sick of "living at work"- because it feels more like that than working at home. We recognize that it might not be the best educational outcome, but also that it can have very good results if done correctly. With adequate training for educators, we believe virtual school this fall could be a robust learning experience for Arlington students. Better safe than sorry.

If teachers and students are to be back in the building with a hybrid model, it is the responsibility of this committee to make that environment as safe as possible. We have been very impressed with the safety improvements the facilities department has been implementing, but we need to go further. More handwashing stations are needed. The district needs to commit to not using rooms that don't have proper ventilation. In the past few years, teachers have taught in jackets when the heating broke in the winter, or

in classrooms that sweltered near 100 degrees because windows wouldn't open. We need better response time to breakdowns, and assurances that repairs will be made. Every teacher who has gone through the process of entering a third, fourth, fifth helpdesk ticket for the same issue is wondering why now, when stakes are so much higher, they should suddenly trust that repairs will be made quickly. Every teacher who has been told money has run out for restocking supplies worries about sanitizer and soap supplies once school opens. Every time our code of conduct has not been enforced by administration, whether it's something minor like using a cellphone or a larger issue like causing a class disruption- teachers are now wondering what will happen when a student refuses to properly wear a mask.

But no matter how safe the buildings, reopening them during a pandemic is going to require a social contract between families and staff. It means frequent testing for everyone in buildings. It means that if a child wakes up not feeling well, families must promise not to dose them up on Tylenol and send them to school. It means following state quarantine rules- no secret weekend trips to Disney World or grandma's house in a hot spot state because "flights are just so cheap right now." It means children will be taught social distancing and wearing masks is not an option, even when they are hanging out with friends at Dunkin Donuts or in the Center. When we see groups of teens not following best practices around town, it makes every teacher worried for what will happen once school starts. It is the unknown of what happens when students walk out of our classrooms that worries teachers the most. Every new day will bring new risks if community members are not acting safely.

There is no good answer. We are all just trying to do the best we can. Because of that, we ask you to please, put safety first. Our lives literally depend on it.