

January 26, 2021

Dear Governor Hogan and Superintendent Salmon:

No one wants to get back to school safely and sustainably more than educators. We, the educators working daily with students and families, are painfully aware of the effects of this year's challenges and trauma upon our students and their families. We are frustrated by the lackadaisical implementation of, and resources for, safety measures in our schools. We are frustrated by the lack of availability of vaccines after being told how important it is for us to get vaccinated. We want to be back in our schools, safely and sustainably, for our students.

CHERYL BOST
President

DOUG PROUTY
Vice President

JOSEPH COUGHLIN
Treasurer

SEAN JOHNSON
Executive Director

While your letter called for partnership, your actions have consistently and inappropriately tried to paint educators as opponents and obstacles. In your letter, you state that "[our] advocacy for a safe but expeditious return to in-person instruction would be a critical stepping stone to mitigating further disrupted instruction." Perhaps you are unaware, Governor Hogan, since you have never accepted a meeting with us throughout the course of your administration, and perhaps you are unaware, Dr. Salmon, since you have refused to meet with us and ended all stakeholder meetings in August, but that is exactly what we have been advocating for over these long months of the pandemic.

But let's dispense with the pretense. You are well aware that we have been advocating for a safe and sustainable return to classrooms. You are well aware that 20 of 24 districts, according to MSDE's own reporting, have already returned for at least small group instruction for at least some of the school year. You are well aware that the safety measures we have consistently called for are not some set of arcane and unachievable steps, but the very things that the CDC, Maryland Department of Health, MSDE, and OSHA have called for. You are well aware that we have encouraged our members to get vaccinated as soon as possible and helped to answer their questions about the vaccine and the process.

You are also aware of the delay and lack of state resources to assist local school districts to put in place health and safety protocols and staffing needed to reopen schools safely and sustainably. You are aware of the delay in developing statewide health metrics this summer to guide reopening decisions and now the near elimination of such guidance. Currently, you are also aware of the inadequacy of vaccine distribution thus far. Clearly, much of the blame for this can be laid at the feet of the Trump Administration. However, you also know that news reports and analysis have declared Maryland's vaccine distribution to be one of the

slowest in the country. Data compiled by Oxford University from the CDC indicates that Maryland has the 12th-lowest level of vaccinations per 100 residents among all the states, just above Kansas and less than half the rate of the states with the highest levels of vaccination distribution.¹ Many educators are hearing at your press conferences that they can now get vaccines only to find no vaccine available to them in their counties. It is deeply disappointing that you are spending your time and energy blaming and threatening educators rather than fixing the problems that are making it harder to reopen our schools and state more broadly.

During your press conference, you, Governor Hogan, declared that there is “no public health reason for county school boards to keep students out of school.” This statement would be laughable if it were not so dangerous. It is abundantly clear in light of the escalating number of infections, mutations, and deaths that coronavirus is anything but predictable. The risk of infection increases dramatically when individuals are in close physical proximity, particularly indoors, in spaces with poor outside air ventilation, and for extended periods of time. What has also become clear is that school-aged children who are infected with coronavirus can transmit it to the adults with whom they have contact. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on January 16 that “recent studies and outbreaks show that schoolchildren, even younger ones, can play a significant role in spreading infections.”² A Calder Center study released in December of Michigan and Washington found that “reopening schools in areas with higher caseloads, though, does spread the virus.”³ This question is far from settled, despite your pronouncements.

As a result, a multi-pronged approach of mitigation strategies is necessary to limit the spread of coronavirus in schools. The CDC unequivocally states that “resuming and maintaining in-person learning may pose risks to children, teachers, school administrators, and other staff in the school environment, and their families and household members.” The CDC continues to state that the decision to re-open schools must be weighed against the risks of spreading coronavirus in the school and community. No one should allow a reckless public relations action to outweigh the public health risks.

¹ “State-by-state data on COVID-19 vaccinations in the United States,” University of Oxford, <https://ourworldindata.org/us-states-vaccinations>.

² “Europe’s Schools Are Closing Again on Concerns They Spread Covid-19,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 16, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/europes-schools-are-closing-again-on-concerns-they-spread-covid-19-11610805601>.

³ “Do schools spread COVID? It may depend on how bad things already are around them,” *Chalkbeat*, January 4, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2021/1/4/22214312/covid-spread-schools-research>.



President Biden's executive order, which was signed on Thursday, the same day as your press conference, demonstrates not only thoughtful leadership but also support for a profession whose voices you have attempted to minimize and villainize in reopening discussions. It calls for federal agencies to prioritize worker safety and to provide schools with financial aid, cleaning, masking, proper ventilation, resources for testing, contact tracing, and vaccinations for educators. These critical pieces in the reopening conversation were glossed over, at best, in your announcements. The Biden executive order also requests the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services to provide new guidance for schools on whether and how schools may safely reopen. These are the types of solutions we need in our schools to properly reopen safely and a model of the type of support and leadership we desire.

In contrast, on Thursday you scrubbed from state guidance the health metrics around positivity rate and cases per 100,000, which were previously used to guide reopening decisions locally. You accused others of shifting goalposts, while you didn't just move them, you now deny their existence. Is the positivity rate no longer important? Are cases per 100,000 no longer something to worry about? At your press conference, Dr. Chan stated that "school reopening decisions should not be based on the availability of vaccinations or the level of vaccinations among staff." Less than 10 days before you—in a step we called for and praised—moved educators up to Phase 1B in vaccine distribution. Yet now it's no longer important that they receive a vaccine? The mixed messages that you are sending are confusing and anxiety-provoking to educators and many parents across the state.

Since you no longer feel these health metrics and precautions are important, I assume that you will now return to holding all of your meetings, including State Board of Education meetings, in person regardless of vaccination rates or health metrics in our state. As you know, Dr. Salmon, I have spoken during public comment about educator concerns around health and safety at State Board meetings for months and have offered to work collaboratively. I look forward to your publicizing when the State Board will be moving its meetings to in-person and how educators may continue to provide you feedback during limited public comment, which is the only way we have been able to speak to you since the school year began.

As a teacher, I am so proud of all educators who are working so hard for the children and families of Maryland. It is disheartening that you feel that educators should be threatened with the loss of pay and their license for refusing to return to schools—not that this is a legally sustainable threat



and not that this should be regarded as appropriate or motivating in the least. I have never, in all my years, heard of a single statement uttered by a state leader that caused more tears, more anxiety, and more frustration among educators than your threat to withhold their pay and revoke their licenses at the very moments when they were working incredibly hard, as they have for months, to make the best of educating our students in impossible circumstances.

No one wants to open school buildings safely and sustainably sooner than educators. That will continue to be our focus, and I hope it will be yours as well, rather than more U-turns in the state's guidance and further inappropriate public bullying of educators. These actions do nothing to improve and save the lives of Marylanders, but your concerted efforts to improve vaccine distribution and health and safety protocols in school buildings very well could. We see the promise of these efforts from the Biden Administration, and urge you to take the same inclusive and responsible problem-solving approach rather than one of finger-pointing and division. I remain ready, as I have throughout this pandemic, to work with you and local leaders to reopen school buildings safely, sustainably, and expeditiously.

Sincerely,

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

Cheryl Bost
MSEA President

Cc: Clarence Crawford, State Board of Education President
Diamonté Brown, Baltimore Teachers Union President