

**URGENT DECLARATION ON SCHOOL SAFETY—ON BEHALF OF
OVER 70,000 EDUCATORS IN CENTRAL FLORIDA**

July 13, 2020

Today, over 70,000 educators, school leaders, and school employees in Florida’s I-4 corridor issue this joint message underscoring what parents, teachers, and health experts across the state and country are demanding—**schools must reopen safely**. On Friday, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA), and the School Superintendents Associations (AASA) issued a joint statement affirming the value of in-person learning and committing to do everything they can to meet that goal, but calling for science and community circumstances to guide decision making and emphasizing the critical need for funding. **Florida must put safety and science first.**

As educators, we are charged with providing facts about matters that affect your children and their educational progress. We are compelled to inform you that there is no comprehensive plan from the State or our local leaders for safely reopening schools. Local leaders will get this right only if they prioritize safety and support of our exceptional education programs, provide adequate resources, engage in thoughtful planning, and listen to health authorities and other stakeholders. The State of Florida is getting it woefully wrong by impulsively and politically pushing local school boards to reopen schools.

As Florida experiences an alarming increase in COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths, Florida’s Commissioner of Education issued an unfunded, tone-deaf Executive Order demanding that districts must open all brick and mortar schools. A statewide order to reopen all schools without consideration of community spread and with no adequate preparation or planning, goes against the recommendation of health experts and the CDC. This reckless directive could endanger the health and lives of students, parents, family members at home, educators, and the community at large. Our schools are the backbone of our community and they must be treated as such.

A safe reopening consistent with health experts’ and CDC guidelines on physical distancing, sanitation, and use of Personal Protective Equipment requires increased funding and thoughtful planning. Prior to the pandemic, Florida’s school districts were already financially struggling after decades of underfunding. Teachers and parents have been forced to provide students with even the most basic supplies, like soap and tissues. We know that our schools do not have the resources for the necessary increase in custodians, teachers, physical space, buses, PPE, and hygiene and disinfectant products needed for a safe reopening. Likewise, there is undeniably not enough time in the next few weeks to accomplish the amount of planning that is essential for a safe reopening given the metrics of the COVID-19 surge. We hear numbers every day, but behind the numbers are real lives—deaths in our families, lifelong disability, months of rehabilitation, and scores of healthcare workers themselves getting sick.

While we know that face-to-face learning is optimal, we cannot support any plan that will expose students and teachers, and the families and communities they love, to illness or death. Academic challenges can be addressed—a lost life cannot. Every educator wants to get back to in-person instruction as soon as it is safe to do so. Reopening schools prematurely and without the proper plan, resources, and safety precautions will only exacerbate the spread of the virus, jeopardize public health, and ultimately cause longer closures. We are confident that high-quality learning can continue through pedagogically sound online instruction that prioritizes student engagement and provides children and teachers with **the tools and training for success**.

Decisions must be made based on science, safety, compassion, and commonsense—not on political agendas. We are calling on our State and local leaders to work with health authorities, parents, and educators towards solutions that will protect our citizens and ensure that our students have the safest and best education we can offer during this crisis.

Respectfully Signed,

Carmen Ward, President of the Alachua County Education Association

Anthony Colucci, President of the Brevard Federation of Teachers

Robert Kriete, President of the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association

Stuart Klatte, President of the Lake County Education Association

Mark Avery, President of the Marion Education Association

Wendy Doromal, President of the Orange County Classroom Teachers Association

Lare Allen, President of the Osceola County Education Association

Stephanie Yocum, President of the Polk Education Association, Inc.

Daniel Smith, President of the Seminole Education Association

Elizabeth Albert, President of the Volusia United Educators

###

