

# Vermont-NEA Task Force on Reopening Schools Calls for Establishment of Statewide Reopening Commission

June 22, 2020

Dear Colleagues:

The school year will have “officially” ended by the time you receive this. We hope you will take some much-needed rest and find time to spend with friends and family. Since our last communication, the State of Vermont issued **health and safety guidelines** for the eventual reopening of public schools. You can read the document here: <https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-vdh-guidance-strong-healthy-start-school-health-rev-20200617.pdf>.

Vermont-NEA informs us that the Agency of Education anticipates it will need to issue additional health and safety guidance in the months to come as pandemic conditions and community needs evolve. **Our Task Force is analyzing the current document to provide feedback to the AOE on its merits and on how it can be improved.**

We met for a second time on Wednesday, June 17. At that meeting, the following decisions were made:

1. Establish a Statewide Reopening Commission for Public Schools
2. Organize a townhall “virtual” meeting for Vermont-NEA members with Dr. Mark Levine, Vermont Commissioner of Health
3. Mobilize to increase funding for public schools

## **Vermont Needs a Statewide Reopening Commission**

The Task Force authorized Don Tinney, president of Vermont-NEA, to contact Governor Phil Scott and Dan French, the Secretary of Education, and urge them to convene immediately a statewide reopening commission of union educators and ESP, superintendents, principals, school board members, parents/caregivers, and concerned citizens.

Vermont needs such a commission with sufficient local educator/ESP and school administrator engagement to tackle the profound academic, medical, infrastructural, and social challenges associated with reopening. Unless there is extensive state-local cooperation and coordinated action, what all of us most desire, the recommencement of learning and support services in our schools, may prove to be unsafe or, at a minimum, significantly delayed.

It is unfair and unrealistic – especially now that the school year has ended – to expect 53 supervisory unions to suddenly start reopening planning largely on their own and in isolation from each other. It is also unrealistic to expect that the state can develop and deliver clear, consistent, and uniform guidance on teaching, learning, facility changes, and ongoing safety requirements without the direct input of the people who work in and are served by our public schools.

*Let's come together, tightly coordinate the work of disparate task forces, and get this planning done.*

A state planning commission will:

1. Delineate the responsibilities of the state and local school districts in reopening planning, funding, and resource allocation and facilitate the fulfillment of these responsibilities.
2. Establish a realistic timeline for reopening consistent with the recommendations of state health officials and the needs of local districts.
3. Provide uniform, science-based guidance to school districts and staff on how to:
  - (a) prepare school facilities and vehicles for the re-entry of students and staff and their necessary movement throughout the school day;
  - (b) prepare staff to make operational and curricular changes necessary to keep students and themselves safe and to conduct in-person learning under pandemic conditions;
  - (c) establish social distancing measures for classrooms and other school spaces;
  - (d) establish and oversee safe hygiene practices, including the provision of masks and other personal protective equipment;
  - (e) prepare academic and social service contingencies in the event there are rolling school closures;
  - (f) establish systems for effective communication with parents/caregivers, students, local communities, and public health officials.

*Each of these categories requires detailed planning and funding for a wide range of student and staffing needs, academic, social service and extracurricular programs, vehicles, and facilities.*

*We strongly recommend that educators, ESP, school administrators and the AOE read NEA's comprehensive guidance on reopening, "**All Hands on Deck: Initial Guidance Regarding Reopening School Buildings,**" to get a full appreciation of the immense and complicated work that must be undertaken so that we can determine when and how to safely reopen schools. [You can read the document here.](#)*

### **Townhall Meeting in July with Dr. Mark Levine, Vermont Commissioner of Health**

The Task Force asked Vermont-NEA to see if it could schedule a townhall "virtual" meeting with Dr. Mark Levine, Commissioner of Health, in early July. This would provide Vermont-NEA members with the opportunity to discuss health and safety concerns that affect them and their families and that bear on the reopening of school. The Task Force will work with our union staff and Dr. Levine to organize, schedule, and facilitate this event.

### **Increase Funding to Public Schools**

The Task Force and Vermont-NEA are fighting for increased funding and staff for public schools. Our schools desperately need a generous infusion of federal money earmarked to states for COVID-19 recovery efforts. The long-term success of in-person and distance learning and the implementation of broad safety measures depend on it.

Many of us, like you, have struggled for years with the harmful consequences of budget cutbacks. COVID-19 has only made things worse, and more funding is urgently needed to reopen schools safely, to deliver a high-quality education to every student, and to rectify glaring socio-economic and racial inequities in learning.