

# RETURN TO IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION

The members of the Illinois Federation of Teachers are eager to return to in-person instruction, but we have grave concerns for the safety of our students, their families and communities, and the educators of this state. **We believe that some types of in-person instruction can be achieved with health and safety mitigation, but absent a practical safety plan that includes the guidance below and incorporates a clear line of responsibility and enforcement, we call for the 2020-2021 school year to begin with remote learning.**

We thank our members for their dedication, passion, and commitment during these trying times. Even though school buildings were closed, educators never stopped working and doing what we know and love while juggling families, children, and anxieties of the future. We want to be back with our students, but it must be done as safely as possible.

Since schools, colleges, and universities transitioned to remote learning in March, the IFT has made it a priority to ensure that all plans to return to in-person instruction prioritize health and safety, are grounded in science, and follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) guidelines. Even though Illinois' current COVID-19, positivity rate has improved over the past several months, the rate is currently unstable and, in some regions, clearly on the rise. This trend indicates that surges of COVID-19 spread, infections and deaths are still a very real threat, as acknowledged by both Governor JB Pritzker and Dr. Ngozi Ezike in their statements on July 15. In their guidance for the return to in-person instruction in the fall, the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) have acknowledged the obligation and need to protect students and staff from COVID-19 infection. In fact, in their "Part 3 – Transition Joint Guidance" the ISBE and IDPH have stated that the transition back to in-person learning should be done, "while holding paramount the health and safety of students and communities." Schools are a type of congregate setting that are proven to be high risk for spread of the disease. **Therefore, the following must be considered:**

- Schools and campuses are designed to bring together large numbers of people in enclosed, inconsistently ventilated, indoor spaces for hours at a time.
- According to a July 10 Kaiser Family Foundation Study, 24% of all educators are particularly susceptible to the virus due to underlying health conditions.
- Black and Brown students (who make up more than 43% of our P-12 student statewide population, 37% of our community college population, and 31% of our Institution of Higher Education) and their families face healthcare disparities that have made them more likely to suffer ill effects from the new coronavirus.
- According to a July 11, 2020, article in the New York Times citing the CDC, we still don't know enough about how the virus affects children nor how likely they are to transmit the virus to adults.
- The obvious challenge inherent in ensuring that all students and staff are wearing masks, washing hands, and maintaining social distance as consistently as necessary to create a safe environment.
- The concern that educational agency guidance calls for social distancing in P-12 merely "as possible."
- The contact tracing program is not fully functioning with only 15% of the estimated 3,800 contact tracers that a state of our size would require.
- The CDC lists full return to in-person instruction to be the highest risk category for schools.
- Last Friday, July 17, the state announced 1,384 new cases. In the past seven days, Illinois has seen a total of 10,000 new cases. While Illinois has significantly lowered its positivity rate, the rate is rising according to data from the IDPH.
- As the COVID-19 positivity rate in Illinois grows, some individuals will get very sick and some will die. Some will be students, some will be the parents, siblings and grandparents of students; some will be educators and staff.
- The IDPH director, Dr. Ngozi Ezike, stated on July 15 that we need to be aware that people in ages 10-19 and 20-29 are having higher case rates now and she warned, "the virus is now being spread by youth."



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## RETURN TO WORK SAFELY MEASURES

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For our members, students, and families to feel safe returning to schools and campuses, **IFT is calling for each district, college, and university to have:**

- All educational institutions working with their unions now to negotiate safe and effective learning plans; parents and students should be partners in these community discussions.
- A sustainable school day or course model that incorporates blended learning, which allows for appropriate social distancing and does not exceed 15 students in the same classroom at one time; or on campuses, a room that can adequately accommodate all individuals using CDC recommendations on social distancing.
- The right of educators to determine the best mode of instruction.
- A clear safety plan that includes enforcement and accountability of the required IDPH and CDC guidelines for schools and campuses.
- Temperature checks and/or health screenings for all students, staff, and visitors prior to entry.
- A required two-week quarantine when a student or staff tests positive for COVID-19 or has a high-risk exposure to COVID-19, with special paid sick leave provided by the employer.
- Contact tracing notifications to students, families, and staff when a positive test occurs for a person who is known to have been in a school or campus building.
- Coronavirus testing availability—especially for people in rural communities.
- Comprehensive plans for ensuring a safe and clean physical environment in schools and on campuses, including the remediation of poor ventilation systems.
- Employer accommodations for high-risk students and employees.

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## EQUITABLE SAFE REOPENING FOR OUR FAMILIES

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COVID-19 lifted the veil on the disparities that exist among our students and families, especially our Black and Brown students. The moment requires stability and equity for our families and children if they are going to thrive. **We believe that:**

- Broadband access and devices need to be provided for all students, in any academic institution, so they can participate in remote learning as needed.
- As we are readying for a safe return to school, we must prioritize the students and families with the greatest need for in-person instruction to return first.
- Families need access to free or affordable health care now.
- All academic institutions must engage in trauma-informed practices and crisis intervention.
- Evictions and foreclosures need to be halted during these unstable times.

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## CHILDCARE FOR PARENTS

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We know that none of the choices before us are consequence-free. While blended and remote instruction offer the safest paths for our students and staff, we acknowledge that they create logistical and financial challenges to thousands of Illinois parents. For this reason, **we ask that all educational institutions work to identify the families that need childcare and work to provide opportunities with local partners and organizations in helping fill gaps during the instructional day.**



Illinois Federation of Teachers  
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