

February 9, 2021

The Honorable Toni Atkins
President Pro Tem, California State Senate
State Capitol, Room 205
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Anthony Rendon
Speaker, California State Assembly
State Capitol, Room 219
Sacramento, CA 95814

SUBJECT: REOPENING OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Dear Madam President Pro Tem and Mr. Speaker:

We are writing to express the strong support by California Chamber of Commerce for the Governor and Legislature to urgently reach an agreement to reopen California public schools in a deliberate, safe and timely fashion. CalChamber represents 14,000 small and large businesses in the state, representing one-quarter of the private sector jobs in California. Many of our employees are parents or guardians of public school students who are struggling with remote learning and its effects.

The private and public sectors have stepped up on many fronts to mitigate the economic devastation and social dislocation from the pandemic. The Governor and the Legislature have expanded the social safety net and provided some economic relief for employers and employees. Front line workers, whether hospital employees, EMTs, firefighters, grocers, truckers, utility workers and many, many others have met the challenge by continuing to serve the public. Employers have reorganized the workplace where possible to enable remote working or safer on-site conditions. Society, commerce and government have responded. Now is the time for our public schools to fully join this effort.

State education officials and other surveys estimate that about 70 percent of the state's school districts are still in distance learning — accounting for roughly 85 percent of the student population.

Nobody disagrees that school children have been devastated by schools being closed:

- School enrollments have dropped precipitously as many children have either disconnected or never were connected in the first place.
- A Stanford study suggested that the average student has lost at least a third of a year's worth of learning in reading and three-quarters of a year's worth of learning in math. Another study found that the loss of learning could reduce the lifetime income of today's American students by 3 percent.
- A survey of Los Angeles teachers found that 94 percent said low student engagement was a barrier to remote learning. The vast majority of teachers say their students lack quiet spaces, adequate technology and high-speed internet and do not have schoolwork help from an adult.
- All of these problems are even worse for the students who were disadvantaged and underserved before the pandemic crisis.

While the worst impacts have befallen students, distance learning has also affected the workplace. Nearly a third of employers nationally have seen employees leave the workforce — primarily in businesses that are public facing, such as retail, leisure and entertainment, health care and social assistance. Another 29 percent of employers saw employees leaving their businesses to seek employment elsewhere. This churn is not just because these workers lost jobs, but because in many cases their jobs are incompatible with their family responsibilities, like supervision of their remote-learning children and lack of adequate child care.

This is an existential issue for the California economy. Our schoolchildren are the future employees for California small and large businesses. Other nations are prioritizing returning students to schools. Reopening schools is not only a matter of student achievement, mental health and family normalcy, but is a matter of global competitiveness and viability for California businesses.

Outside of the education establishment, the notion of returning students to the classroom is rapidly gaining credibility and urgency:

- The CDC recently concluded that in-person schooling poses very little risk of coronavirus transmission as long as basic safety precautions are followed.
- California's state health officer, Erica Pan, stated that "Schools should absolutely reopen."
- President Biden has recognized the urgency of this issue, vowing to reopen schools within his first 100 days in office.
- Pediatricians in Southern California have called for schools to reopen.

We acknowledge and appreciate the extraordinary efforts by teachers and school officials this year to ramp up distance learning in the face of enormous uncertainty about the nature of the virus and anxiety within the larger school community. We have learned much since last August about how to minimize risks and are fortunate to be able to rely the guidance of public health officials who have adjusted their recommendations based on the prevalence of the infection and evolving best practices.

Governor Newsom has laid out a conservative but realistic plan to reopen schools in California, applying the lessons learned from science and best practices, and recognizing that the Covid infection trend is beginning to abate. State officials announced today that 37 counties are below the Governor's proposed threshold for re-opening K-6 schools, as determined by the California Department of Public Health. We urge the Legislature to reach an agreement with the Governor rapidly on a plan and funding so schools may immediately accommodate some or all students on campus when it is safe to do so.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Barrera
Executive Vice President



Robert Moutrie
Policy Advocate

cc: Legislative Affairs, Office of Governor Newsom
The Honorable Nancy Skinner, Chair, Senate Budget and Fiscal Review Committee
The Honorable Jim Nielsen, Vice Chair, Senate Budget and Fiscal Review Committee
The Honorable Phil Ting, Chair, Assembly Committee on Budget
The Honorable Vice Fong, Vice Chair, Assembly Committee on Budget
The Honorable Tony Thurmond, State Superintendent of Public Instruction
Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond, President, State Board of Education

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