

POSITION STATEMENT

Adopted by Virginia PTA Board of Directors



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VIRGINIA'S PHASED SCHOOL REOPENING

The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus in early March 2020 and subsequent closing of Virginia's schools to slow the outbreak resulted in an unprecedented interruption in our education system and economy as students, families, teachers and administrators partnered to keep children learning while at home. We commend the work of our educators and families during this challenging and difficult time. We know this has not been easy. We realize that many students and families are currently facing economic hardships and some have lost loved ones as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As we prepare for schools to reopen for the 2020-2021 school year, we acknowledge the complexity and financial burden of adhering to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommendations. We know there is no one answer that meets the needs of every community. It's critical, therefore, that we remember that the CDC issues guidance, not regulations, and that guidance will continue to change as scientific discovery expands. We know that the economy cannot fully restart until schools fully reopen, thereby enabling parents to fully return to work. Schools are not just a place of education, but also the center of our communities. In our schools, students have guaranteed access to caring adults, nutritious hot meals, school nurses, school counselors, and opportunities to interact with their peers.

Virginia PTA prioritizes the health and welfare of students, staff and families and supports reopening plans that provide high quality education, are community centered, practical, feasible and meet the risk tolerance level of individual communities.

The school reopening phases assume families have the ability to support education at home. This places a tremendous burden on the economic and mental welfare of families. We offer the following positions to our PTA members to support advocacy and thoughtful community discussion.

CHILDCARE & PHASED REOPENING

In our recent Virginia PTA Fall 2020 School Reopening survey, 20% of respondents indicated they could not support distance learning or a rotation schedule due to their work. This potentially leaves thousands of children at home alone; creates a financial burden for families who would need to pay for child care; expands the student's contact circle; places childcare facilities in a position of supporting distance learning instead of a licensed teacher and/or could result in employees leaving the workforce to be at home with children. This also includes teachers, who may need to return to work for in-person instruction but who may have children that don't qualify for in person instruction based on the phase or who have a different rotation schedule. Access to childcare is particularly concerning when considering that families in Blue Ridge, Southwest and Southside Regions are more likely to work outside the home and/or in essential worker jobs, rely on school meals and have lower internet connectivity.

- Virginia PTA supports policies that improve accessibility to licensed, affordable childcare for all families and supports unique scheduling options for families for which childcare creates an undue financial burden.

- Virginia PTA supports students and staff wearing a face covering in phases I, II and III IF it creates a situation that enables more children to attend school and alleviates the childcare burden on families.
- Virginia PTA urges a clear definition of the triggers that initiate and end Phases I, II and III to support community-based planning and risk evaluation.

COMMUNICATION

At the root of PTA is a long tradition of close collaboration with teachers to increase family engagement and academic success. However, at no other time has strong parent to school communication and collaboration been as vital to student success as it is now.

- **Stakeholder Surveys:** Virginia PTA urges schools to conduct parent, teacher and school staff surveys. Inviting select community members to a work group forms a helpful guideline; however, given the impact this new instruction style has on family income, health and welfare, it's critical to seek direct and regular feedback from ALL caregivers, teachers and staff members. Virginia PTA also supports student surveys related to students' experience and expectations with distance learning.
- **Consistent Instruction Platform:** Virginia PTA supports the use of a single school division-wide learning platform for all grade levels to ease a family's ability to support distance learning and streamline school to family communication.
- **Email Policy:** Virginia PTA supports email guidelines that ensure parents receive or are able to view emails from the teacher to the student with work assignments or instructional guidance. Additionally, Virginia PTA supports email guidelines that acknowledge the executive functioning capabilities of students and seek to reduce the volume of emails to students.
- **Clearly Communicated Accountability Standards:** Virginia PTA supports communication plans that provide families with the following information in multiple languages prior to the start of the school year:

Communication about Cleaning & Safety:

- How and when schools will be cleaned to meet federal and state safety guidance;
- How and when school buses will be cleaned to maintain safe transportation;
- Clearly defined standards for monitoring student and staff wellness;
- How and when parents will be notified if there is a COVID case in the classroom and/or school and the resulting cleaning plan and expected change to instruction;
- Information about how student/staff privacy will be maintained for wellness checks and in the event of a positive COVID-19 case;
- Clearly defined expectation for allowing frequent hand washing and meal service
- Clear expectation regarding face coverings for students and staff; and
- **If temperature is checked,** clear communication about when and how temperature will be checked; how variances will be addressed to identify illness versus a normal, healthy temperature that is higher than average and what happens when a student or staff member has an elevated temperature.

Communication about Instruction:

- How teachers will be held accountable for high quality distance instruction;
- Expected division-level frequency of virtual meetings or synchronous instruction;
- Definition of absenteeism and class attendance expectations for distance learning;
- Clear grading plan and impact on overall student record, if there are distance learning changes to accommodate students who may contract COVID and have higher than usual absence rates;
- How parents can access the digital platform to review and monitor student work; and
- Clearly defined expectation for how and when substitute teachers will engage with students for both in person and distance learning

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT & VOLUNTEERING

Research shows that students with involved parents are more likely to earn higher grades, pass their classes, attend school regularly, have better social skills, and go on to post-secondary education. Volunteers are essential to the success of our community schools and students. Volunteers are intimately familiar with school operation procedures and will be able to help establish a culture of safety during a time when extra support may be needed to meet CDC guidance.

- Virginia PTA supports continued and active volunteer engagement during ALL phases of the school reopening plans within the normal standards for volunteer screening and in coordination with school administration. Virginia PTA also supports access to schools in all phases for other critical community partners that contribute to student success and engagement in the community.

INSTRUCTION

Research shows that best learning practices include opportunities for hands-on, cooperative learning with students having voice and choice. The CDC guidelines' physical distancing guidance is contrary to established best instructional practices, although the guidelines do create a unique opportunity for small class instruction.

- **Teacher-Student Connection & Class Size:** Virginia PTA supports maintaining the existing student to teacher ratio. Virginia PTA supports students receiving distance learning instruction from the same teacher(s) that support them for in person instruction.
- **New Content:** Virginia PTA supports students receiving instruction on new content in the classroom or via synchronous or virtual instruction, and limiting any reliance on students or parents to introduce new content to themselves in the distance learning environment.
- **Flexibility due to Health Risk and Illness:** Virginia PTA supports flexible schedule options that allow for a student or staff member who has a high health risk or who are ill to be able to participate in full distance learning without an impact to their attendance rate or grade.
- **Special Education:** Virginia PTA supports in-person IEP & 504 meetings when requested by the parents and/or caregivers. Virginia PTA does not support the use of separate Temporary Distance Learning plans. Rather, Virginia PTA supports districts using existing Individual Education Plan (IEP) documentation methods (including IEP amendments both with and without meetings) to address all learning conditions, phases, and compensatory services as necessary for students with disabilities. Virginia PTA supports additional federal

and state funding, as well as increased staffing ratios, to support districts' abilities to provide compensatory services.

- **English Language Learners:** Virginia PTA supports access for teachers to translation services and a standard set of flyers/resources to improve the ability of families with limited English to support learning at home. Based on the results of our survey, Virginia PTA supports textbooks for English Language Learner students.
- **Equity Audit:** At-risk learners including those that are economically disadvantaged, early learners, experiencing homelessness, English learners and students with disabilities face unique challenges in the distance learning environment that may exacerbate achievement gaps. Virginia PTA applauds the Virginia Department of Education's focus on equity and supports division-level and school-level Equity Audits not only to plan for the return to school but also to communicate ongoing work to the school community.
- **Student Progress Testing & School Accreditation:** Virginia PTA supports the development of materials and training that allow teachers to identify potential learning gaps as part of new instruction. Virginia PTA supports funding for division-level assessment tools that measure student growth.

TECHNOLOGY ACCESSIBILITY & DATA PRIVACY

- **Student Devices:** Virginia PTA supports programs and funding that provide every student participating in distance learning with a device or laptop computer.
- **High-Speed Broadband/Wi-Fi Hotspots:** Lack of internet in a distance learning environment will exacerbate existing inequities. Virginia PTA renews its call for programs and legislation that expedite infrastructure development to provide every Virginia household with access to affordable, high-speed internet.
- **Online Safety & Student Privacy:** Virginia PTA supports instruction that teaches students healthy screen and online safety habits. Virginia PTA urges the rigorous implementation of policies that protect student data and images and discourages sharing of virtual classroom images or student work on social media platforms without written permission from parents. Virginia PTA supports policies that allow students to keep their cameras off during synchronous instruction.

HEALTH & CULTURE OF SAFETY

- **Mental Health & Trauma Informed Schools:** Virginia PTA renews its call on the General Assembly to establish Standards of Quality that meet national standards for members of a full Unified Mental Health Team including a school counselor, school psychologist, school social worker and school nurse and/or substance abuse specialist. Given that 61% of families indicated the COVID-19 outbreak has had a mental health impact on their student, it is critical that federal, state and local governments provide funding to support mental health staffing and programs be established to support trauma informed practices and schools.

- **Recess:** High quality recess breaks improve mood, health, well-being, school engagement, behavior, learning, focus, attendance, and overall school climate. Virginia PTA supports no less than 30 daily minutes of unstructured, free choice recess. Virginia PTA supports volunteer involvement in monitoring recess to provide teachers with adequate break and planning time during the day. Virginia PTA opposes withholding recess as a form of punishment for any reason.
- **School Nurses:** Virginia PTA supports using a multi-factor health assessment approach that includes not only need for acute care, but also social determinants of health to determine effective school nurse workloads for safe care of students. Per our resolutions passed in 1993 and 2009, Virginia PTA supports inclusion of a school nurse position in the Standards of Quality and its exclusion from the student support position cap. Virginia PTA supports staffing of one registered school nurse per school. Virginia PTA supports the use of trained paraprofessional school health aides working under a registered school nurse to meet the full medical staffing needs of schools.
- **COVID-19 Testing:** Virginia PTA supports federal, state and local funding and legislation programs that make COVID-19 test kits available to schools. Virginia PTA supports parent permission prior to administration of a COVID-19 test or administration of any vaccine.
- **Training & Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for Schools:** Virginia PTA supports federal, state and local funding and legislation that provides critical staff training and resources to maintain a safe school environment including:
 - Training for Nurse/Health Specialist on identifying and containing COVID-19;
 - Training for all staff members on infection prevention;
 - Funding for Personal Protective Equipment to be used during school day including clear face shields, face masks and gloves;
 - Funding for no-touch thermometers; and
 - Programs that centralize PPE ordering to reduce competition between schools.
- **Facility Health Standards & Cleaning Supplies:** Prior to the pandemic, many Virginia schools had inadequate and unhealthy building conditions. Virginia PTA renews its call for federal, state and local investment in the infrastructure of our schools to ensure that windows can be opened safely, that ventilation and HVAC systems are maintained, and that indoor air quality can be monitored. Virginia PTA cautions against the health inequity that can result when relying on parents or PTAs to provide cleaning supplies and urges federal, state and local funding to be provided for custodial supplies, soap and paper towels for restrooms and classrooms, and disinfectant wipes and hand sanitizer for classrooms.

TRANSPORTATION:

According to the National Council on School Facilities and Cooperative Strategies, a traditional bus seats 56 students. Students riding a school bus without masks and seated every-other row to maintain 6 feet physical distancing would reduce bus capacity from 56 students to 7 students, an 88% reduction in capacity. Comparatively, seating students in every row while wearing masks allows the bus to operate with 28 students at a 50% capacity. Virginia PTA acknowledges the task that school districts face as they work to ensure buses are cleaned after every run and are still able to transport high volumes of students in a cost effective and efficient manner. Virginia PTA



supports operating buses at no less than 50% capacity in Phase III and supports funding for cleaning supplies. Virginia PTA supports use of volunteers and/or staffing for bus monitors.

PAID AND FLEXIBLE SICK LEAVE POLICIES:

Lack of access to paid family and medical sick leave results in families sending students to school when they are sick and encourages hourly employees to report to work to ensure income. Families shouldn’t need to choose between the health and welfare of their family and paying for essentials like food, rent and healthcare. To mitigate community spread and alleviate stress on families, Virginia PTA supports legislation that provides families with paid, flexible sick and leave policies.

CARES ACT FUNDING & EQUITABLE SERVICES

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), students that attend private schools who are failing or are at risk of failing, or live in a public school attendance area with a high concentration of low-income families, are entitled to receive equitable services from the local public school district’s allocation of federal funds. Local school divisions received CARES funding through an ESSA Title I driven formula, however, guidance from the United States Department of Education has defined equitable services using CARES funds as being for all private school students, not just the disadvantaged students identified under ESSA. Virginia PTA opposes diverting CARES funds from the most economically disadvantaged students and supports the provisioning of equitable services for private school students following the traditional ESSA Title 1 formula.

June 18, 2020: Adopted by the Virginia PTA Board of Directors

Virginia PTA Position Statements are adopted by the Virginia PTA Board of Directors and are official documents based on our mission, research and/or previous resolutions or positions of either Virginia PTA or National PTA. Position Statements outline the opinion, will, or intent of the association to address a current statewide situation or concern that affects children and youth and which requires statewide or national attention and action to address the issue.

NOTABLE RESOURCES:

Virginia PTA Fall 2020 School Reopening Survey	https://www.vapta.org/advocacy/adv1/legislation-priorities
National PTA Position on School Reopening	https://www.pta.org/docs/default-source/files/advocacy/position-statements/reopening-schools-for-2020-2021-ps.pdf
National PTA Position on Distance Learning	https://www.pta.org/docs/default-source/files/advocacy/position-statements/distance-and-remote-learning-for-k12-students-ps.pdf
Virginia 2020 Recover Restart Redesign	http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/health_medical/covid-19/recover-redesign-restart-2020.pdf
VA Governor School Reopening Phase Guidelines	https://www.governor.virginia.gov/media/governorvirginiagov/governor-of-virginia/pdf/Final-Phase-Guidance-for-Virginia-Schools-6.9.20.pdf
VA Governor School Reopening PowerPoint	http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/health_medical/covid-19/va-return-to-school-plan.pptm
VA Governor Forward Virginia Phased Reopening Guidance	https://www.virginia.gov/coronavirus/forwardvirginia/
CDC School Decision Tree	https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/Schools-Decision-Tree.pdf
CDC School Reopening Guidelines	https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/schools.html

