NJPSA Testimony Before the Assembly Education Committee  
On School Restart and Reopening Issues  
July 22, 2020

On behalf of school leaders across New Jersey, I thank you for today’s discussion about the most important and complex decisions we have faced during my career in public education – the restart and reopening of schools in the midst of the current global pandemic. School principals and supervisors are working diligently with their communities at a hectic pace to evaluate the best options they can offer their students in the context of the NJDOE’s Restart and Recovery Plan for Education that issued a few short weeks ago. NJPSA has shared our detailed analysis of that report with you prior to today’s hearing, and we are happy to discuss it in more detail today.

I would like to highlight several top priorities, continuing concerns, and core principles to guide decision-making as New Jersey schools and families quickly move toward Labor Day weekend and the traditional start of school this Fall.

1. Clear, universal requirements on health and safety practices, not flexible guidelines, must be the foundation for school reopening in all school districts.

Districts are being asked to sign an “attestation” to the NJDOE and our school communities that we are guaranteeing that we have adequately met the CDC guidelines as “flexibly” adopted in New Jersey as minimum health standards. This is causing a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety in the planning process. In the current Restart Report, ambiguous health guidelines enable schools to meet minimum safety requirements in a variety of ways. Science, not funding and the ability to employ the required personnel, should determine what needs to be in place to ensure maximum safety. Schools often are forced to “make due.” This, however, cannot be one of those times. We firmly believe we need to be in a position, regardless of monetary concerns, to provide the safest possible school environment for all stakeholders. Universal maximum health standards must be the bar or New Jersey will see a new inequity arise in our school system – an inequity in the level of health safety provided to students and staff across districts.

2. In order to meet health guidelines, schools also need to acquire the appropriate PPE, cleaning products and equipment. We must
ensure all schools have these necessary supplies. Schools are experiencing difficulty because of lack of availability and cost.

3. On Monday, Governor Murphy announced that parents now have a choice of all remote learning, yet a school must continue to offer in-person instruction in “some capacity” as another option. In order to evaluate this choice, parents need guidance and information from the Department of Health that will help them assess the risks. Knowing that every district must follow the same health guidelines is a vital first step. Parents should not be forced to compare whether children in District A are safer than children in District B. Teachers and other staff should also not be faced with those same comparisons.

4. Legislative advocacy to increase funding for schools is essential.

Schools serve as a community hub providing for instruction, meals, student wellness and safety, student development and more. This pandemic has reinforced the importance of this central role. Even with the availability of CARES Act funding to most districts (41 received no funding), the reality is schools need funds to address the additional costs caused by the pandemic. We ask for your advocacy for our schools as a final state budget is considered.

5. The Restart Report creates a de facto duty of care that school districts must meet to ensure student safety. This will be difficult without funding, staffing, up-to-date facilities, and clear, universal health rules ensuring districts meet that duty of care. In this circumstance, we ask the Legislature to consider legislation to address the many liability issues within schools that the Restart Plan and the public health crisis create. With this perfect storm of circumstances, liability concerns must be fairly addressed. (Consider A-4426 (DePhillips), S-2634(Gopal, O'Scanlon), and S-2703 (O'Scanlon).

6. Principals, supervisors, teachers and all school staff are excited to welcome our students back for in-person learning, but only if and when we can do so safely in the ever-changing context of the coronavirus and with a renewed focus on New Jersey’s learning standards.

School leaders understand that New Jersey’s closing of schools in March and our rapid move to remote learning was a necessary response to a public health crisis. We know this highlighted the lack of
equity in terms of the digital divide. We understand the valuable role that remote learning will continue to play for our students. We understand the urgency and are using lessons learned over the last several months to build stronger virtual learning platforms. The first issue we need to address is universal student access to technology, devices and the internet. We applaud Governor Murphy’s announced initiative to address this critical need for our students. A second priority is the need to provide continuity of learning that is based on high quality standards-based instruction by developing state-wide resources and learning tools aligned to NJ standards that will support all teachers in the delivery of standards-aligned curriculum, instruction and assessment whether in the classroom or virtually. Lastly, professional learning for leaders and teachers is critical to address not only our instructional roles, but also the new roles and procedures we must master to safeguard our students in the school and classroom. Limited funding has put this critical professional learning at risk, yet we must prioritize these needs to foster students’ re-entry to learning, wellness and success.

I want to close by sharing the passion, the grace under pressure and the commitment of school principals and supervisors across New Jersey as they strive to do the best for our students in every town, county and region of this state. We understand the importance of education in the lives of our students and families, its role in the economy of our state and its history as a beacon of opportunity for those yet to come through our doors. In this challenging time, we ask you to join with us and our colleagues in education to support our schools on the many fronts we are collectively facing by supporting and funding our work and helping us safely move to reopen schools with confidence.

Thank you.

Submitted by:
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ATTACHMENT

Unanswered Questions on Health Issues Impacting School Reopening

NJPSA’s goal is clear universal health care standards for schools based upon scientific research that provide the best chance of keeping students and staff safe from COVID-19 and for stopping community spread in the environment of our schools. Unfortunately, there are many unanswered questions in this area which include the following:

Topic Area: What does the Science Say?

1. **Social distance requirements** – Should all districts be required to maintain a social distancing requirement of six feet in all buses, classrooms and school spaces, at all times, to ensure student and staff safe practice for safety?

2. **Exposure time** - What is the current research on the relationship between the length of time an individual spends in close proximity to another and the level of risk of contracting COVID-19? For example, what is the increased degree of risk for students in a school building for 6 hours vs. 4 hours vs. the hour an individual may be in a hair salon?

3. **Space Standards** - What does the research tell us on the relationship between the size of an indoor space and the level of risk of potential transmission of COVID-19? Are there specific minimum square footage standards that need to be met for an entire classroom (not per student) in order for that classroom to be used safely?

4. **Ventilation Standards** - What does research tell us about the specific ventilation standards that should be in place to provide for a safe learning environment? How do we measure whether district systems meet minimum HVAC standards and what happens if those minimum standards are not met? Should the school be required to operate remotely if it cannot meet minimum requirements? How often should these systems be inspected for compliance with these standards?

5. **Asymptomatic Individuals** - In light of the recent research from South Korea that children age 10 or older can spread the virus as easily as adults, and are often asymptomatic, how can we ensure health and safety for those in the school setting? What measures need to be in place to identify asymptomatic individuals? What are the best practices
for schools to use to screen individuals for the virus?

6. **More on Screening** - Will there be uniform minimum standards for screening in schools? For example, is a one-time notice to parents advising them of their affirmative obligation to report if their child has any symptoms on any given day sufficient to meet a school’s duty of care to students and staff?

7. **Temperatures** - Many schools are investing in temperature scanners. Is student and staff temperature a valid screening measure? How should schools collect, utilize and protect this data? If money was no object, would daily temperature taking be a component of a school’s screening process or does health policy dictate a different result?

8. **Visual Screening** – The Restart report relies simply on visual screening by educators, not trained medical professionals, as the single required screening method to be utilized in schools to identify students/staff who may have symptoms of the virus. Is this good health policy to rely on non-medical personnel to perform such a critical health function, based upon a subjective observation with no training or objective measures – particularly when this illness is so contagious? Will the DOH be developing training for educational staff members on how to screen, what to look for, and other issues related to COVID-19 prior to the start of the school year?

9. **Access to Testing** - What is the current statewide capacity for testing on a daily basis? If a school district wished to require daily testing of all staff and students, would the NJDOH be able to work with the district to ensure this would occur? What is the current wait time for receiving results? What should occur in the time period between when someone (student, staff, parent) in school is tested and when the results are received? What is the cost?

10. **Contact Tracing** – Please clarity the respective roles of school personnel and the state and local DOH in contact tracing. What is the current capacity for conducting contact tracing across NJ? What timeline needs to be followed for the local department of health to complete contact tracing? What if the local department of health lacks the capacity to complete contact tracing in a timely fashion? During any delay in contact tracing, how do schools address the danger that
individuals who may have been exposed are continuing to enter the school building?

11. **Positive Test Response** - If someone who was in a school building tests positive, what is the protocol for responding? What time period is considered in determining how to address those who were in close contact? What time period do we consider for determining what aspects of a school need to be closed down for cleaning and disinfecting? Given that the CDC guidance indicates that ideally there should be a 24-hour waiting period before any cleaning or disinfecting occurs, will that be the uniform standard waiting period before any cleaning begins on our schools?

12. **Clearance and Return** – What will be the rules and procedures to clear an individual to return to school following a positive test results? What communications are expected to be made to the local and state DOH and what can schools expect in this area?

13. **Meals** - What does research say on the level of increased risk involved when individuals are eating together and not wearing masks? If indoor dining is not permitted throughout NJ, how is it justifiable to permit indoor dining in schools? (Large schools that cannot distribute food to classrooms must allow students to eat in socially distant individual seating in the largest indoor spaces (café, gym) available. How is this different from a standard for a restaurant?)

14. **Transportation** - Will there be a uniform expectation that a second adult will be on each school bus in order to enforce social distancing and wearing masks since most NJ districts cannot afford to only have 11 students on a school bus? If not, how will standards be enforced?

15. **PPE Standards** – What quality and level of enhanced PPE (e.g., face shield in addition to face mask, gowns, gloves) needs to be provided for school nurses and other staff who are at enhanced risk of contracting COVID-19 due to increased exposure (one-on-one aide, those involved in screening, those involved in cleaning, etc.) How long should a face mask be used before it is replaced?

16. **Face Coverings** – Why is the NJDOH not requiring the wearing of face masks in schools, exclusive of those with health issues, as the core health requirement for all schools since national health experts and
agencies highly recommend the wearing of masks even to walk into a supermarket? Schools could build in breaks when students socially distance as a reasonable local option, but we are sending our students and staff a very mixed message on a critical safety measure.

17. **Impact of Inability to Procure PPE** – Since health agencies unanimously cite the critical importance of PPE to stop the spread of infection, if a school is unable to secure the required PPE prior to the start of the school year, does the start date need to be delayed or alternatively does all instruction need to be offered remotely? Who would need to be notified of this decision within the health context?

18. **Decisions on Reopening** – What are the critical data points that Governor Murphy will review in any decision related to a statewide reopening of school? As cases continue to spike in other states, what will be a data point(s) that would trigger a statewide school shutdown or failure to reopen in-person instruction?

**Topic Area: Roles, Process and the School Context**

1. **Roles** – Please describe the roles and levels of authority of health care areas impacting our schools for both the local and state departments of health.

2. **Communication Network Needed** - Who are our points of contact for issues at the state level and how can we establish a regular line of communication between the state DOH and LEE? The DOH has met with many New Jersey industry sectors but not directly with representatives of a major public employer and service provider, our public school system, and that needs to be addressed.

3. **DOH Procedures** – Are there rules and procedures of the NJDOH that the school community needs to be aware of? How can we gain access to that information so we can share it with our members statewide.

4. **Information to Parents** - Will the NJ DOH develop information, based upon the science, to allow parents to make informed decisions on the level of risk that is associated with their child being in school so that parents are able to make informed decisions about whether or not to allow their child to return to school? When can such information be developed so schools can properly assess the levels of parent interest in remote only learning and in person schooling?
5. **Attestations** - If districts are being required to sign attestations that all health and safety standards can be satisfied prior to reopening, will the district be denied the clearance to reopen by the DOH if the district is unable to sign that attestation? School and district leaders are deeply concerned about their ability to ensure the safety of students and staff with such limited funding, staffing and equipment backlogs that minimum standards may not be able to be ensured in every district. This will result in an inequity in health safety across school districts. How will the NJDOH handle such situations?