

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 29, 2020

Dr. Robert R. Redfield, MD
Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
4770 Buford Highway, NE
Atlanta, GA, 30341-3717

Dear Dr. Redfield:

We write to request that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention immediately begin tracking and sharing data regarding the spread of COVID-19 in America's schools.

Safely reopening schools should be one of our top priorities. President Trump has repeatedly stressed the importance of reopening our schools. In August he said, "We cannot indefinitely stop 50 million American children from going to school and harming their mental, physical, emotional, and academic development and inflicting long-term, lasting damage." Similarly, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos warned against letting fear dictate our educational choices for our children. She said, "students and their families... can't be held captive to other people's fears or agendas."

Efforts to reopen our classrooms should not happen in the dark. If the Trump Administration is truly committed to alleviating fear, reducing the risk of harm introduced by keeping kids out of school, and protecting the safety of our students and communities, the CDC must step up to do the vital public health work necessary to understand and respond to COVID-19 transmission in our schools.

We know that the tough decisions American families are making at the start of this school year are intensely personal. They hinge on the specific strengths and vulnerabilities of their children, the health risks of their loved ones, and the resources available to them to overcome the challenges ahead. No two families are the same in these regards. That is why our constituents deserve COVID-19 school data to make well-informed choices that are best for their circumstances.

The limited COVID-19 school data we do have so far is troubling. This week the CDC reported that more than 120 youth (aged 21 and younger) have died of COVID-19 between February and July. Notably, the burden of disease revealed stark disparities. Seventy-five percent of the youth deaths were students of color, despite Hispanic, Black and American Indians or Alaskan Natives making up only 41 percent of the U.S. youth population. Further, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (NHPI) acquire underlying chronic medical conditions, such as obesity, diabetes, asthma, kidney disease, cancer, and cardiovascular disease, at younger ages than other ethnic groups. This puts NHPI students at greater risk of severe symptoms of COVID-19. We cannot allow these disparities to continue. Data is the first step to addressing these alarming inequities.

As we continue to work toward additional relief desperately needed by our educators and schools to help them reopen safely, your agency can help answer a difficult question: How do we keep our kids safe in school? As Brown University economist Emily Oster warned, “Without good data that tracks cases over time — and shows how one case turns into many cases — there's just no way to answer that question. In January, we'll be in the same position that we are in now, and kids still won't be in school.” Right now valiant teachers, school districts, and state officials are working to collect and publicly report this data on a volunteer basis. Unfortunately, this uneven patchwork will leave too many families without the information they need to make the best decisions for their families and reduce the quality of the data available to researchers working to advance our understanding of this virus and how to beat it. Comprehensive study of school transmission of COVID-19 by CDC will be necessary if we are to best protect our schools.

As part of CDC’s mission, your agency “conducts critical science and provides health information that protects our nation against expensive and dangerous health risks.” The threat the novel coronavirus poses to our schools and communities fits squarely within that mission. We cannot allow the best public health scientists in our country to ignore the data necessary to understand COVID-19 outbreaks in educational settings. Students, teachers, staff, families, and their broader communities deserve robust access to COVID-19 school data to help them understand the risks of returning to in-person instruction. Additionally, researchers and school administrators should have access to this data to better understand the epidemic’s impact in their own regions and to learn from the experiences of schools across the country so they can craft successful safety policies.

We need your help to advance the strategies that will help our families and educators return to school safely.

With these thoughts in mind, please respond by October 12, 2020 with a detailed explanation of CDC’s current data collection, research, and public information efforts related to transmission of COVID-19 in our schools and communities. We ask that you immediately begin collecting school COVID-19 data if you have not done so already and to quickly work to make that information available to the public.

Thank you for your consideration and attention to this matter. We look forward to working with you to ensure that science drives the American response, recovery, and preparedness in this crisis.

Sincerely,



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