



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
November 16, 2020

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## **DSEA President calls for more oversight from Governor's Office at school district level**

“First and foremost, we want to thank all of the educators in Delaware for the work they are doing inside and out of our schools. To the teachers who are cleaning desks, purchasing their own PPE, providing instruction both remotely and in-person (often at the same time), eating lunch in their cars to avoid eating in the building near others, working 16+ hours a day, and learning new platforms to be able to better reach their students, we thank you. To the Education Support Professionals (food service, custodians, transportation, secretaries, and paraprofessionals) who are making sure that students have the food, technology, cleanliness, safety, supplies, and support they need to keep learning, we thank you. To the Specialized Instruction Support Personnel (counselors, psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, library media specialists, speech language pathologists, nurses, and many more) who in trying times are finding creative and effective ways to continue with student assessment, diagnosis, counseling, therapy, and the other necessary services that they provide, we thank you. To all the educators who feel their efforts are undermined or taken for granted by some in the community, we want you to know that we see you, we hear you, and we thank you.

As we look at the COVID data for our state, we see a drastic and dramatic rise in number and rate of infections. The Department of Health and Social Services' website, MyHealthyCommunities.com, shows significant increases in new case rate and % tests positive not only statewide but also in New Castle and Kent Counties. As for Sussex County, the increase of 24.0 % in new case rate over the last three weeks is a concern given that Sussex started in the red zone for this measure and continues to grow. Likewise, the increasing hospitalization rate is a concern since if it tops 25.0 daily average hospitalizations per 100,000 persons, Sussex will have two red and one yellow reopening criteria. Those statistics paired with us heading into the holiday season traditionally marked by family gatherings – which will undoubtedly happen whether we like it or not - causes us to be concerned that the rise in new cases and % positive tests will continue.

We are told that our schools are a safe place to be. If what is happening outside of our schools is what is increasing the numbers - how do we deal with it? Because, it will soon affect the safety inside our schools.

Because of this current increase in new cases, our members are actively engaging with their local administrations. They are giving feedback from inside of the schools, they are asking for support, and they are asking to be kept safe – and in many districts they do not feel like they are being heard. To address those concerns, we have the following suggestions:

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- More guidance as to when schools should be closed by the district. There is no consistency when it comes to what is needed to close a school.
- More guidance when it comes to increasing the number of students in a building
- Public and district communication regarding re-entry plans
  - No school board should be relinquishing the right to approve a re-entry plan or relinquish the right for the public to weigh in on their plan
- Distribution of PPE. Our members are not receiving the PPE that they need to do their jobs.
  - Many educators have to buy PPE for themselves and their students out of their own pockets in districts that have not supplied it or do not have an ample supply.
  - Most disturbing is the lack of district supplied full body PPE gear for those educators who work with children with severe disabilities.

To be clear, something isn't working here. What we are hearing from members has led us to ask for this oversight from the Governor's Office at the district level. We need the oversight and assurance that districts are doing all they can to abide by these health and safety guidelines, and we need the state to hold them accountable.

Our educators are exhausted. They are worn down. And they are tired of feeling like they take the brunt of the criticism. We need to talk about the great work that our educators are doing, because if we don't, we will lose them. Our educators are superheroes. And, while educating is their superpower, a lack of health and safety enforcement is their kryptonite. They are in school with their students because they love to teach, but they don't feel like their safety is a concern, especially as these numbers continue to climb and safety guidelines aren't complied with in every district. We need ramped up enforcement to ensure compliance with health and safety guidelines.

Educator concerns are deepening by the day due to most districts looking to expand the number of students they are bringing into the building for in-person learning. With the daily increase in cases, we need this oversight now more than ever.

Now is the time for strong and responsible leadership. Educators deserve better. We want to be heard. If these things are not able to be done, and we can't ensure that being in school is a safe choice, then we have no other option than to ask for districts to return to full remote learning environments until the compliance is enforced and our numbers stop increasing at a rapid pace and have decreased to a level that ensures a safe return for students and staff."

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