



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 18, 2022

Contact: Shelley Meadowcroft
Shelley.Meadowcroft@dsea.org
302-922-7554

DSEA President Stephanie Ingram Calls for Districts to Assess Operational Capacity

“Educators in Delaware’s public schools came back from winter break to an environment that was unlike the one they left in December. We have been meeting and talking to DSEA members over the last 2 weeks, and what we are hearing is concerning, to say the least. Now, let me be clear from the very beginning, I am not writing this to suggest that all schools should return to virtual learning environments. What I am doing, on behalf of my members, is asking for changes to be made to combat the operational challenges being faced in order to keep our students, staff, and entire school communities safe. For some districts, that may be to return to virtual learning if necessary – and some have done that already. But, for many districts there are changes that can be made to provide a quality and safe in-person learning environment for all.

Our members have returned to their schools and found the winter surge of COVID depleting the resources that were already limited and insufficient. If we want to keep our students learning in-person we need to make sure that we do it in a safe and effective manner. There is a huge deficit in the number of professionals available to keep schools operating in the manner they need to be. Each school district has received an influx of money through the American Rescue Plan. We are asking that this money be used to help solve the operational capacity issues in our schools.

This pandemic has exacerbated staffing and substitute shortages. Schools are using paraprofessionals to cover classrooms, monitor students, and provide instruction, as well as Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (like counselors, librarians, and social workers) having to cover classes when a substitute is unavailable. In some instances, multiple classes of students are being placed in cafeterias or auditoriums at the same time with a singular staff member rather than having class because of coverage issues. Students are arriving late to school because the lack of transportation workers is causing bus drivers to make multiple, back-to-back runs each day. In some cases, they are also driving special needs buses without the assistance of bus aides.

School COVID cleaning protocols are not being kept up with due to the limited number of daytime custodians available. This is on top of the fact that there is limited access to the necessary COVID testing in school sites because of the new 5-day return period and increased need for testing. Our school nurse workloads are overwhelming and unreasonable due to the increased COVID workload on top of their regular duties. The operational challenges of keeping our schools open is growing by

the day. Just keeping students in school is not the quality instructional experience we all expect it to be.

What we are hearing from our members is that they WANT to be in school with their students, but they need more support from their districts to make this in-person learning environment safe and effective. Our members are asking for all COVID cleaning precautions to be resumed, KN95 masks distributed to all staff members for safety precautions, adequate support to meet increased needs of educators/paras, nurses, transportation, and custodians, and for each district to create a plan to address operational challenges and to communicate in an effective and transparent manner with the entire school community they serve.

We know this can be done, as we have seen it happen in districts in our state. Laurel School District has publicly released a plan that outlines their operational capacity, and how they are working to remain in-person. They have also given themselves an operational rating so they can be transparent with their school community as to what needs are being stretched too thin. Some of these issues are daily issues and don't necessarily mean a turn to virtual instruction, but some may in the future. We are so incredibly thankful for Laurel's thoughtfulness and transparency around this issue. Each district has their own operational issues and we believe setting out a plan similar to this one will help keep the students, parents, and staff on the same page and stop confusion and frustration around the operational abilities of our schools.

So, I am asking on behalf of my 13,000 DSEA members that School Board members and district administration officials throughout Delaware hear the pleas of their staff. We ask that you recognize your operational capacity to best serve students, and clearly communicate with your school communities to ensure a transparent conversation around the district's ability to best serve their students.”

###