

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

February 9, 2021

President Joe Biden
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Mr. Jeffrey Zients
COVID-19 Response Coordinator
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden and Mr. Zients:

As physician Members of Congress, we urge you to work with the governors of each state to follow the science and safely get our children back in the classroom as expeditiously as possible.

Many children rely on their schools for key socialization, education, and nutritional health services. The abrupt transition to exclusively virtual learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically impacted the developmental, emotional, and mental health of school-aged children. In just one county in Nevada, over eighteen students have taken their lives since the shutdown, and the county has received over 3,100 alerts to its system that monitors student mental health.¹ According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), mental health emergency room visits increased 24 percent this past March-October over 2019 visits for children ages 5 to 11, and rose 31 percent for children ages 12 to 17 over that same period.² This transition to at-home virtual learning has also put much additional strain on parents, who are earnestly trying to navigate and balance the competing pressures of their own work and caretaking responsibilities.

In March, when schools across the nation shuttered their doors, they did so to protect the health of their students, staff, faculty, and teachers. Nearly a year later, we now know much more about how this virus spreads, its impact on vulnerable populations, and best practices on how to navigate this “new normal” in a safe and healthy manner. Based on this updated knowledge and according to this Administration’s own experts, we now know that we can reopen our classrooms in a manner that is safe for students, staff, faculty, and teachers.

On January 26, 2021, CDC researchers released data and policy recommendations to return children to in-person learning.³ According to their findings, “school-related cases of COVID-19 have been reported, but there has been little evidence that schools have contributed meaningfully to increased community

¹ “Surge of Student Suicides Pushes Las Vegas Schools to Reopen.” *The New York Times*, 24 Jan. 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/01/24/us/politics/student-suicides-nevada-coronavirus.html.

² Leeb RT, Bitsko RH, Radhakrishnan L, Martinez P, Njai R, Holland KM. Mental Health–Related Emergency Department Visits Among Children Aged <18 Years During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, January 1–October 17, 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2020;69:1675–1680. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6945a3>.

³ Honein MA, Barrios LC, Brooks JT. Data and Policy to Guide Opening Schools Safely to Limit the Spread of SARS-CoV-2 Infection. *JAMA*. Published online January 26, 2021. doi:10.1001/jama.2021.0374

transmission.”⁴ Two days later, Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Health’s National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and Chief Medical Advisor to President Biden’s COVID-19 Response Team, endorsed these updated CDC recommendations, noting the risk of infection for a child is less in a school setting, than when compared to the risk in the general community. He further emphasized, “we need to try and get the children back to school, and that’s the goal of President Biden’s.”⁵

We appreciate that many states are prioritizing schoolteachers for vaccination to expedite the return to in-person learning. While we certainly support these actions, based on the best available science as reflected in your Administration’s own guidance, teachers can, and should, begin to return to classrooms even while vaccine distribution is ongoing. CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky recently highlighted the fact that “there is increasing data to suggest that schools can safely reopen and that safe reopening does not suggest that teachers need to be vaccinated in order to reopen safely.”⁶

As policy makers, we understand the many challenges to reopening schools in a manner that ensures both student and teacher health and safety. While we continue to craft policies to help our society navigate and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, safely returning our students to in person learning is of the utmost importance. To help address these challenges, Congress included \$82 billion for the Education Stabilization Fund in the relief package signed into law in December, prior to the Biden Administration taking office.⁷ It is our sincere hope that you will marshal these resources in an earnest effort to achieve our shared goal of safely returning as many students as possible to in person learning as soon as possible.

Being Members of Congress with medical backgrounds and direct patient care experience, we remain concerned for the health and education of our children if they cannot return to their classrooms. We are encouraged that your Administration appears to share this goal. With this in mind, we request that you follow the science and work with all governors to take the known necessary, reasonable safety measures to resume in-person learning.

Thank you for your consideration and for the consideration of students across the country.

Sincerely,



Andy Harris, M.D.
Member of Congress



Brad Wenstrup, D.P.M.
Member of Congress

⁴ Honein MA, Barrios LC, Brooks JT. Data and Policy to Guide Opening Schools Safely to Limit the Spread of SARS-CoV-2 Infection. JAMA. Published online January 26, 2021. doi:10.1001/jama.2021.0374

⁵ “Morning Joe.” MSNBC, 28 Jan. 2021, www.msnbc.com/msnbc/embedded-video/mmvo100154437768.

⁶ *Press Briefing by White House COVID-19 Response Team and Public Health Officials*, 3 Feb. 2021.

www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/02/03/press-briefing-white-house-covid-19-response-team-and-public-health-officials/.

⁷ United States, Congress, *Consolidated Appropriations Act*, 2021.



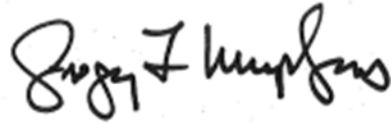
Michael C. Burgess, M.D.
Member of Congress



Mariannette Miller-Meeks, M.D.
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Gregory F. Murphy, M.D.
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Diana Harshbarger, Pharm.D.
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Ronny L. Jackson, M.D.
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Earl L. "Buddy" Carter
Member of Congress



Paul A. Gosar, D.D.S.
Member of Congress



Neal P. Dunn, M.D.
Member of Congress



A. Drew Ferguson, IV, D.M.D.
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jefferson Van Drew', written over a horizontal line.

Jefferson Van Drew, D.D.S.
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark E. Green', written in a cursive style.

Mark E. Green, M.D.
Member of Congress