

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

December 15, 2020

The Honorable Philip D. Murphy
Governor of the State of New Jersey
Office of the Governor
225 W. State Street
Trenton, NJ 08625

Dear Governor Murphy:

As your administration and New Jersey health officials continue the decision-making process regarding the allocation of initial COVID-19 vaccine doses, we write to urge you to give a high level of priority to teachers and other school employees across our state. We appreciate the vaccination framework¹ that the New Jersey Department of Health recently released, and ask that an emphasis be placed on helping teachers safely return to the classroom. While there are many groups that deserve prioritization strictly on public health grounds--and we recognize the necessity of getting the vaccine to them--we believe that there is a profound public interest in safely reopening schools, which argues for vaccinating school employees as soon as feasible.

The closure of schools across the country beginning in March has forced millions of K-12 students to learn virtually. However, new evidence suggests that virtual learning can harm the educational attainment of students compared to in-person learning, and can significantly amplify educational inequities based on income. A recent National Bureau of Economic Research working paper² found that school closures and the shift to remote learning has caused a decline in children's skill attainment, with those impacts being "especially severe for those with parents with low educational attainment." Similarly, researchers at Brown University³ found that school closures have caused students to lose a worrying amount of their expected academic progress from last year.

As well, a survey from the nonprofit group ParentsTogether⁴ found that students with disabilities and those on Individualized Educational Programs were likely to not be receiving all of the support services that they are entitled to. Furthermore, there is evidence that school closures may

¹ COVID-19 Vaccine Priority Groups. New Jersey Department of Health.
https://www.state.nj.us/health/cd/documents/topics/NCOV/Priority_Groups_English.pdf.

² The Long-Term Distributional and Welfare Effects of Covid-19 School Closures. Nicola Fuchs-Schündeln, Dirk Krueger, Alexander Ludwig & Irina Popova. The National Bureau of Economic Research.
<https://www.nber.org/papers/w27773>.

³ Projecting the potential impacts of COVID-19 school closures on academic achievement. Megan Kuhfeld, James Soland, Beth Tarasawa, Angela Johnson, Erik Ruzek, and Jing Liu. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. <https://www.edworkingpapers.com/ai20-226>.

⁴ Survey Shows Big Remote Learning Gaps For Low-Income And Special Needs Children. Anya Kamenetz. NPR.
<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/27/862705225/survey-shows-big-remote-learning-gaps-for-low-income-and-special-needs-children>.

be weakening the jobs recovery as parents stay home with their kids rather than return to work. New research published by the New York Times⁵ estimates that over one million parents may be out of the labor force because of these closures. Dr. Anthony Fauci highlighted this message in an ABC interview⁶ on Nov. 29th when he advised that states should do all that they can to safely “keep children in school or get them back to school.”

As a result, the safe reopening of schools should be a priority over the next several months, and we believe that a critical component of this strategy should be the vaccination of teachers and other critical support staff. This will help to blunt any school-based spread of COVID-19 that some, but not all, states have faced, and will therefore allow students to get back in the classroom safely. The challenge of getting children back to school while keeping them and their communities safe is a daunting one, but we believe that this step, alongside greatly increased federal funding for school safety efforts, will allow these efforts to be successful.

Thank you for your attention to this extremely important matter that will help to support children’s learning and reduce inequities in our education system. We greatly appreciate your very strong leadership throughout this crisis and look forward to continued engagement on this important subject.

Sincerely,



Mikie Sherrill
MEMBER OF CONGRESS



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Josh Gottheimer
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Andy Kim
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⁵ The Mystery of How Many Mothers Have Left Work Because of School Closings. Ernie Tedeschi. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/29/upshot/mothers-leaving-jobs-pandemic.html>.

⁶ Fauci said authorities should 'close the bars and keep the schools open' to cut down on coronavirus infection spread. John Dorman. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/anthony-fauci-close-bars-school-instruction-coronavirus-infections-health-2020-11>.



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