NAME Urges Caution In Reopening Schools

Because of COVID-19, its extreme contagiousness, the illnesses and deaths it has caused worldwide, the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) urges public school districts, charter schools and private schools to have thorough and well-conceived plans for restarting classes in the fall. They should not be bullied by President Donald Trump or state governors to reopen when COVID-19 cases continue to surge. The only goal that matters after nearly five months of social distancing and forced distance learning is the safety of students, educators and their families. Until there is a cure or a vaccine to protect the population, there is no “safe return” and there can be no “normal.” The first case of COVID-19, diagnosed in late 2019, and its rapid spread across the globe in 2020, forever altered what was “normal”. Because of the traditionally close and dynamic environments of classrooms and playgrounds around the world, the new coronavirus, the COVID-19, remains a threat to everyone’s health, in the US and beyond.

Teachers understand this. USA Today in a May 27 “Back to School?” article reported that when schools reopen in the fall, “a stunning number of teachers and students may not be there.” A USA Today/Ipsos poll showed that 1 in 5 teachers say they are unlikely to return to classrooms in the fall. The massive wave of resignations would trigger a never-before-imagined teacher shortage in U.S. schools. The article said, “Though most teachers report working more than usual, nearly two-thirds say they haven't been able to properly do their jobs in an educational system upended by the coronavirus.” Parents remain just as wary about returning their children to schools in today’s COVID-19 conditions. The USA Today article said that 6 in 10 parents with at least one child in grades K-12 reports that they would likely seek at home learning options rather than risk their child’s health and that of their families by sending the children back to classrooms. “Nearly a third of parents, 30%, say they are ‘very likely’ to do that,” USA Today reports. The National Center for Education Statistics shows that at least 56.6 million students in fall 2020 are expected to attend U.S. elementary, middle and high schools. About 1.4 million will be in preschool. About 50.8 million of those students will enter public schools in grades prekindergarten through 12. Among those kids, the majority, or more than 53 percent, will be students of color. They are from families that disproportionately have suffered the highest coronavirus death rate, infection rate and unemployment because of COVID-19. Schools that reopen must take great care not to further harm these students and their families. The center also indicates that about 3.7 million teachers are expected to be in classrooms in the fall. Education Week using National Center for Education Statistics data reports that the U.S. has roughly 32,000 K-12 schools.

Schools are supposed to educate and be of service to the people in the communities where they are located. NAME knows that it is absolutely paramount for them to help ensure the health and safety of the students, educators, families and people in the community. At least once a day, buildings and school buses must undergo deep anti-viral cleaning. Handwashing is a must along with hand sanitizer use and wipes. Opening too soon without a workable plan to prevent the spread of COVID-19 would harm the people and the communities that the schools are supposed to serve.

NAME recognizes that an additional problem that school officials face in making reopening plans is how to pay for the extra costs of keeping schools safe. COVID-19 and the social distancing it prompted, caused businesses to close, unemployment to skyrocket and people to stop spending money in an economy where consumer spending accounts for 70 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product. In a few short months, the coronavirus has thrown the U.S. economy into a deep recession and strangled sales and income taxes for states. As summer began, many states lifted the stay-at-home restrictions, but that has resulted in a surge of coronavirus cases, hospitalizations and deaths. The unrelenting grip COVID-19 has maintained on the economy is deeply affecting school financing, which is primarily a function of state funding. The outcome could be the loss of 300,000 teaching jobs, USA Today reported in a May 28 article. School officials are struggling to contend with the budget shortfalls and the possible loss from teachers deciding not to return.

NAME knows that it is imperative for Congress to appropriate COVID-19 relief funds to ensure that K-12 schools are fully funded especially for a safe return to class. Federal, state and local health officials must work with educators to ensure that schools are safe when they reopen. “Normal” has changed, which means the start of class in the fall can be nothing less than flawless.