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January 4, 2021

Stephen L. Wotring  
President, West Virginia Association of School Administrators  
Superintendent, Preston County Schools  
100 Angus E. Peyton Drive  
South Charleston, WV 25303

Dear Superintendent Wotring:

We begin 2021 re-energized with a renewed sense of collaboration to ensure the children of West Virginia receive the education, support and protection our school system provides. The letter you sent on behalf of the West Virginia Association of School Administrators (WVASA) encouraging a refinement of safety protocols and a review of virtual and remote instruction illustrates the dire need in every county to bring our children back to school at this time. Working together, we will continue to promote the education, health and well-being of our students and school employees.

We appreciate the robust review and analysis of the data by our state health officials that has guided Governor Justice's decision to open school buildings to in-person instruction. As educators and administrators, we have all accepted the charge to not only educate the students of our great state, but to address their needs. We know it is only when those basic needs are met can learning begin. In virtual and remote settings, the academic achievement as well as the social/emotional/physical and educational needs of our children are too often unmet, and the ensuing trauma they face is compounded. The WVASA understands the importance of live teaching more than most, and with the data and mitigations informing our efforts, we are prepared to return to in-person learning.

Your letter reinforces what I have heard first-hand from principals, teachers, counselors and service personnel during my travels across the state – students need to be back in school in person because their academic progress and success hinges on the instruction and guidance they receive from their teachers. These relationships and the learning process are greatly interrupted when students move to online and remote platforms .

This resounding message of the one caring adult is powerful, and it is the same throughout West Virginia. Whether it be the special education teacher, the Communities in Schools coordinator, the bus driver, the fourth grade teacher or the high school counselor, these individuals serve on the front lines of our public school system and they see and feel the undeniable toll of being separated from our children. Additionally, many families have reached

out to the Department and the Board requesting the return to in-person instruction because of their inability to provide their children with rigorous instruction while working full-time or multiple jobs.

We know more now – 10 months into this unprecedented pandemic – than we did before. We have revised our protocols and refocused our efforts to make the schools safe. We know the importance of our key mitigation strategies. Masks are now mandated among all staff and students grades three and above as a verified line of defense against the virus. I appreciate the leadership of your members in ensuring the mitigations outlined in our updated protocols are stringently followed in schools and classrooms across the state.

The low transmission of the virus in our schools does not reflect what we have experienced in our communities, and when schools move to remote learning because of county transmission rates, we often see additional community spikes. Bringing our pre-k through 8 students back to the building while supporting allowances for remote learning among high school students aligns with guidance from local and national health experts. I appreciate the actions of Governor Justice to pave a path forward for families choosing in-person learning for their children.

West Virginia's aggressive vaccination plan for school employees is yet another critical layer of defense and a testament to the priority given to our school employees. This proactive measure provides even more assurance of the safety of our schools. Vaccine rollout plans are being shared with superintendents this week and vaccines will soon be administered quickly and efficiently statewide for school personnel.

Board of Education President Miller Hall and I appreciate the insight the WVASA has offered and the important roles each of your members play in the lives of our children. President Hall is a tireless advocate for students, and we have discussed the issues of student well-being during the pandemic at length. We are hopeful 2021 will be a year of great success as our state moves forward armed with more knowledge and a renewed respect for what our educators and school personnel do each and every day.

Sincerely,



W. Clayton Burch  
State Superintendent of Schools



Miller Hall  
President,  
West Virginia Board of Education



December 21, 2020

Clayton Burch, Superintendent  
West Virginia Department of Education  
1900 Kanawha Boulevard East  
Charleston, WV 25305

Dear Superintendent Burch:

Every superintendent in the state of West Virginia begins their journey by taking a legally binding Oath of Office in which we are charged to “faithfully discharge the duties of Superintendent to the best of my skill and judgment, so help me God.” Our first and foremost duty is to ensure the safety of the children we serve and the staff we lead encompassing both their physical and social-emotional well-being. Secondary to that is the responsibility to educate and prepare children to be globally successful citizens. The response to this pandemic has closed many of our county school systems and resulted in significant, documented, and ongoing harm to children. Therefore, we must advocate for change.

As superintendents, we recognize the environmental and societal issues created by the COVID-19 virus are beyond the scope of any one organization to mitigate. We trust fully that every civic leader involved has navigated this fraught landscape with as much thoughtfulness and grace as is available to us in the moment. Our responsibility has been to inform ourselves diligently, structure wisely and then execute faithfully within our abilities in the moment. Maya Angelou once noted, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better.” We believe we now know better. We have a body of data that very clearly indicates a better path and we have a duty to journey down this path.

In responding to any new data during this pandemic, the tools that have served us best are humility, work ethic, forgiveness, and faith. This is uncharted territory and, it is crucial that we recognize the correct path will often be one that requires detour from our original. The color-coded map system, as a measure of school safety, served as a starting point for our state but, there is now ample evidence that the measurement of community infection spread is significantly divergent from the spread of the virus documented in our schools. While both vary with the passage of time and local contributing factors, the state-wide infection rate in schools has never risen above 0.5

while the state-wide community infection rate has fluctuated between 3% - 7% since the inception of the measurement system.

The safety protocols enacted by schools are the most stringently instituted in the state. To date, the vast majority of our school systems have had a zero rate of transmission withing the school. Thus, we contend that schools, as they were previous to this viral outbreak, are the safest place for both adults and children in any community. Evidence will also demonstrate that once schools are closed, community spread increases.

In addition to data surrounding the virus, we are also gathering additional data regarding both the academic and social-emotional effect of these closures on our students. The majority of school systems have analyzed initial first quarter failure rates comparing virtual students and students receiving in-person instruction. The disparity is striking. In many cases, the failure rates in virtual learning are more than double the failure rates for in-person instruction. Furthermore, those failures are disproportionately among low income, ESL, minority, and special education students, exacerbating already existing gaps we are struggling to close. There is ample evidence that the closure of schools and execution of virtual/remote learning is significantly less effective in ensuring both student safety and academic progress. Together these facts make a compelling case to implement a more effective system of escalating safety protocols.

We understand the heavy responsibility that lies upon our health officials, our governmental agencies, and, most of all, our Governor. Leadership during these difficult times is an occasion to exhibit greatness, but that often comes at a high price but, it is not a price our greatest resource, our children, should have to pay. The work that has been completed to date has been exemplary and based upon the best knowledge available in the moment. We believe that we can build upon those successes to narrow the focus and more accurately apply measures that are appropriate to the intended outcomes. We stand ready to share this responsibility with you and ask that you partner with us in service to our children. Therefore, we strongly recommend adoption of a refined measurement system to determine school closures and stand ready to assist in the development of new protocols.

Respectfully,

Stephen L. Wotring, Superintendent,  
WVASA President  
Preston County Schools