

# Report of Vermont-NEA Task Force on Safe & Healthy Schools

12-17-20

## Introduction

On Wednesday, December 2, Vermont-NEA's **Task Force on Safe & Healthy Schools** met for 60 minutes with Secretary of Education Dan French and State Health Commissioner Dr. Mark Levine. **Vermont-NEA President Don Tinney** welcomed our guests and introduced the topic of the "metrics" of school closures in this time of rising infection rates and quarantining orders. The rest of the meeting was facilitated mostly by **Kris Hansen**, an educator and local union leader in Bennington, who asked select colleagues to lead portions of the discussion.

This event was preceded by the delivery of a memorandum to Messrs. French and Levine that raised pressing concerns of school employees and recommended changes to the state's current health and safety guidelines.

What follows is a summary of the meeting.

## School Closure Metrics

At present, Vermont is not using a single metric to determine when a shutdown of public schools is necessary. State authorities are relying instead on four metrics – what Secretary French described as "guardrails" – found in the health and safety guidelines. A major factor in any decision affecting the continued operation of schools are infection positivity rates, which, as you would expect, are closely monitored.

**Betsy Nolan**, a member of the Task Force from Burlington, stressed that many school administrators and staff do not understand the "guardrails." This is a common source of confusion and disagreement, she noted, one that has deepened as more children have returned to the classroom.

## Physical Distancing: Classroom/Indoor Spaces

A lot of time was spent on this subject. **Chris Guros** of Montpelier shared the experience of a transmission event that occurred in his district's elementary school in October, resulting in six cases and a temporary shutdown. And this occurred in a district that is enforcing the six-foot rule for younger children as well as older. Chris urged the adoption of the language revisions on physical distancing recommended by the Task Force to clarify and reinforce in the state's health and safety guidance the necessity of continued fidelity to physical distancing metrics. This will become more crucial as the pandemic wears on and people grow weary of maintaining their distance from each other and allow their vigilance to slacken.

Kris Hansen underscored the importance of consistency in messaging and clarity of expression. As she put it, in every context but particularly when we are talking about a pandemic, "words matter."

Secretary French and Dr. Levine appreciated the feedback and understood why the Task Force believes "reframing" some of the language in the health and safety guidelines would be beneficial. They, too, noted the potential effects on maintenance of physical distancing as "pandemic fatigue" sets in. They also reiterated that they believe the distancing metrics per grade levels are still appropriate based on their

scientific understanding of the virus and the fact that we are not seeing infection rates among Vermont children rise markedly.

### **Physical Distancing: School Buses**

**Jimmy Johnson** of Champlain Valley S.U., a thirty-plus year veteran of school transportation, described the impossibility of maintaining physical distancing on buses now that so many more children have returned to in-person learning. In September, he said, you could place one child per seat; not any more. The dimensions of a school bus, which Jimmy laid out, do not permit children to be spaced in accordance with current health and safety guidelines. (Jimmy also drives for a commercial company, and no more than 19 people can be on those buses at any one time.)

Keeping a certain number of windows open on buses, as recommended, is also very difficult now that the weather has turned wetter and colder. The children get chilled easily and, understandably, some take matters into their own hands by closing windows, despite directions to do otherwise from drivers.

School bus drivers tend to be older than the average school employee, and their age alone puts them at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19. Jimmy shared the story of a driver colleague, who years ago contracted H1N1 and was hospitalized, put on a ventilator, and, tragically, died. He was just 23 years old. Memories of cases like this, along with current COVID experiences in Vermont and nationally, underscore why school employees' fears for themselves and their families are real and justified.

Jimmy added that driver resignations are exacerbating the difficulty of meeting the needs of children and their families. His district has lost four drivers since the start of school. Bus drivers, he reminded us, are hard to recruit and hire in the best of times, and he worries about what will be left of his crew after the pandemic and how the district will rebuild that force.

Jimmy also spoke eloquently on the vital role school bus drivers play in ensuring all children get to school and home again safely. *Buses, in other words, are critical to achieving and sustaining equity in education.* We often think about equity in the context of what happens in a classroom; Jimmy highlighted that getting students to those classrooms and to school activities outside of them is equally essential to their educational success and social wellbeing.

Jimmy closed by asking Secretary French and Dr. Levine for more specific guidance and measures to address the problems bus drivers are experiencing and to keep decision-makers locally from "pushing parameters" on distancing and other safety protocols. Secretary French said he would look into this but, presently, he did not have any easy answers.

### **Deep & Regular Cleaning of Schools**

Kris Hansen called attention to Task Force recommendations on cleaning protocols, which, like other provisions in the safety and health guidelines, would be improved by more specificity and clarity. She relayed that some districts are having a hard time keeping buildings and classrooms as clean as they should be during a pandemic, and that teachers and paraeducators statewide are having to do quite a bit of cleaning.

Secretary French said the AOE has not heard as much about cleaning matters of late. This was a more common concern in the summer. He also said the science shows there is little evidence of transmission of the virus from inanimate objects, but he and Dr. Levine certainly believe cleaning must be done, with a

focus in particular on high-touch surfaces, be they in a classroom, cafeteria, bathroom, etc. Finally, Secretary French said he was interested in getting more feedback on cleaning issues and that this is probably one of the areas it makes sense to revisit in the guidelines to consider if changes are needed.

### **Library Books & Quarantining**

**Donna MacDonald**, a librarian in South Burlington, took the lead at this part of the meeting, sharing with our guests how librarians in Vermont and nationally are adapting to the pandemic and the measures they are taking to “quarantine” books and other materials, consistent with guidelines released by their professional organizations and trusted sources of research.

Secretary French said that the state’s infectious disease experts have confidence in the guidelines that permit books to be recirculated immediately upon their return to a library. He reiterated there is little evidence that books or other inanimate objects are a source of viral spread. However, he acknowledged there are differences of opinion on this.

### **Ventilation & Air Quality**

The session closed with a discussion about air quality and ventilation systems. Kris summarized nicely the serious inadequacies with current air circulation and exchange systems statewide, especially in many older schools, and the lack of enforcement and accountability measures.

Kris and Don both stressed the need for more precise guidelines on air-quality standards and called attention to what Don described as the monitoring and enforcement “jurisdiction” problem. Where do school employees turn for an enforcement mechanism or to report serious air quality problems? It does not, from what we have learned, appear to be VOSHA.

Secretary French and Dr. Levine acknowledged there are no “clear standards of enforcement” as yet when it comes to ventilation and air quality, no “firm boundaries,” and this is a concern that comes up frequently. The state, they said, needs more definitive research findings and protocols, and, in the meantime, schools need to be especially attentive to mitigation strategies that work.

Kris called attention to the stricter air quality guidelines in the Task Force’s memorandum, which emanated from NEA and industrial engineers advising our national union.

### **The Upcoming Winter Holiday & Vaccination Plans**

Questions were asked about the status of guidelines for winter holiday gatherings in churches and other multi-family venues, and the present plans for administering the vaccine to non-health care workers in the months to come, especially school employees. In respect to the latter, Betsy Nolan asked Dr. Levine to be mindful of the fact when developing a vaccination strategy that school staff, particularly at the elementary level, are often exposed to bodily fluids.

More generally, Vermont-NEA, NEA and other labor organizations that represent school staff are continuing to engage state authorities on their vaccination planning and the availability of the vaccine to school staff.

## **Conclusion**

The Task Force debriefed on this exchange at its meeting on December 16 and discussed the steps it should take to ensure that the concerns raised at the meeting on the 2<sup>nd</sup> are addressed thoroughly and effectively. Our immediate sense is that the AOE is not inclined at this time to reopen and rewrite portions of the state guidelines. Secretary French made a comment to this effect, explaining that the state prefers not to issue revisions too frequently. That is understandable from the vantage point of messaging and the ongoing challenge of communicating with large numbers of people. However, there will be occasions when the guidelines must be revised sooner than anticipated because safety and pandemic developments dictate. The Task Force believes this is true now based on what is happening in our schools, the upcoming holidays, and the progression of the virus, and it will decide how best to achieve this end while maintaining strong lines of communication with Secretary French and Dr. Levine.

Thank you for all you are doing on behalf of your students and their families. The Task Force will keep you apprised of its work. Please feel free to communicate with us through Vermont-NEA.