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August 21, 2020

Governor Ducey,

The August 17th deadline, a date you called aspirational, has passed, and our schools are still not safe to return to. It is time for you to act in the best interests of our children and their educators. Arizona needs a statewide plan regarding school safety. The Arizona Education Association calls upon you to either initiate such a plan or pass the responsibility over to the Superintendent of Public Instruction to do so.

Everyone agrees students are best served with in-person instruction and with access to safe classrooms, qualified educators, and healthy meals. This is most critical for students of color, whose communities have been more susceptible to the virus, and whose families are unable to be at home with the children because of professional obligations.

Knowing that the first priority of everyone who works with the children of Arizona is safety, the statewide plan should:

- Mandate masks be worn statewide in schools and on buses until the end of the school year.
- Require safety protocols for school districts regarding COVID-19 exposure notification plans for employees and students.
- Cancel this year's high-stakes standardized testing due to the disruptions related to COVID-19 rendering scores unreliable for the 2020-2021 school year.
- Grant school districts flexibility toward meeting the requirement of 180 days of instruction due to impacts related to COVID-19.
- Provide the additional funding necessary to ensure that when schools open to students, that schools can continue to provide safe and healthy learning environments needed for our students to excel.

According to both state and county metrics designed by health experts, not a single Arizona school district is at "minimal" risk. In the absence of a statewide plan, district leaders increasingly feel pressured to readmit thousands of educators and students back to school buildings across Arizona regardless of community spread. This is not safe, not healthy, and will put students and staff at risk.

Educators, parents, and school board members must continue to work together on decisions regarding public schools and the impacts of COVID-19. Local plans need to include the following components:

AEA's Mission

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- Necessary safety equipment and supplies must be provided to all school staff working at district sites.
- School districts must provide alternative opportunities for employees with underlying health issues to contribute their skills and labor.
- School districts that require employees to report to school sites must provide justification that the work is critical in nature and cannot be accomplished at home.

Thousands of education support professionals have already reported to their school sites, bus barns, and maintenance facilities. These public school employees are putting themselves and their families at risk while districts struggle to acquire the personal protective equipment and disinfecting supplies necessary to maintain a safe workforce. A statewide plan must include targeted funding to address this dangerous situation as these shortages will only worsen once students and teachers are brought back.

Another shortage continuing to plague Arizona is the recruitment and retention of teachers willing to work in our underfunded and often overcrowded classrooms. The lack of a statewide plan—one that ensures students and staff return only when we can say they will be safe—is exacerbating that shortage by causing hundreds of educators to seek early retirement. Hundreds more have had to access family and sick leave laws to ensure their own safety and that of their family.

Educators continue to struggle greatly with these decisions. Parents are struggling with how best to support and protect their children. Educators, parents and students need a plan for a safe return to our schools without jeopardizing their health or the health of their family or community. *Safe schools, healthy students and staff* – that should be the Arizona Way.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joseph H. Thomas", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Joseph H. Thomas, President
Arizona Education Association