

**Chairman Alexander Opening Statement
COVID-19: Going Back to School Safely
June 10, 2020**

A May 28 story in the Memphis Commercial Appeal about schools planning for the 2020-2021 school year included a bittersweet image – a young girl reaching her hand out to touch a teacher, who is standing in line to welcome students to the first day of school in 2019.

As the Commercial Appeal reporter writes: “The first day of school in August 2019 would flunk 2020’s course on social distancing.”

Today’s hearing is about how we reopen schools safely this fall – that means teachers welcoming students back without hugs or high fives.

The opening of schools in 2020 is not going to look like 2019.

But today’s witnesses will talk about their work to help 56 million students from kindergarten to 12th grade go back to the 100,000 public schools and 34,000 private schools in the fall as safely as possible.

In doing so, they will help our country take its surest step toward normalcy.

Witnesses:

- Dr. Penny Schwinn, Commissioner of Education, Tennessee Department of Education, Nashville, TN
- Dr. Matthew Blomstedt, Commissioner of Education, Nebraska Department of Education, Lincoln, NE
- Ms. Susana Cordova, Superintendent, Denver Public Schools, Denver, CO
- John B. King, Jr., President and CEO, The Education Trust, Washington, DC

The question for governors, school districts, teachers and parents is not whether schools should reopen – but how.

Any teacher can explain the risk of emotional, intellectual and social damage if a child misses a school year.

Schools need to assess how this year’s disruption has affected our children and get student learning back on track.

At our hearing last week on the reopening of colleges, we heard about a variety of strategies that colleges are using to help keep classrooms and campuses safe, including keeping class sizes small so students can stay 6 feet apart, creating campus-wide policies for wearing masks, and rigorous hygiene improvements.

As with colleges, k-12 schools’ plans will vary for each community and will also depend on the prevalence of the virus in the fall.

The goals for schools working to reopen are fundamentally the same as the colleges we heard from last week: social distancing, aggressive hygiene practices, face masks where appropriate, and then a system of testing and contact tracing.

In order to accomplish those goals, it's clear that school boards, superintendents and principals need to be focused on:

- Creating an environment where students and teachers can socially distance
- Making modifications to the school year calendar and daily schedule
- Preparing to integrate more distance learning
- Restructuring classrooms and extracurricular activities
- Providing meal services in a safe way
- Making sure the school has gloves, masks, and other protective equipment
- Protecting students and adults in the school buildings who are at a higher risk.

To accomplish this, schools will also need to create a strategy for testing and tracing students who may have been exposed. You want your school's testing needs to be in your state plan.

The availability of widespread testing will allow schools to identify teachers and students who have the virus or have been exposed to it and trace their contacts.

Widespread testing not only helps contain the disease; it builds confidence that the school is safe. Fortunately, U.S. Assistant Secretary for Health Admiral Brett Giroir says there will be 40-50 million tests available per month by September. That is 4-5 times today's number—and today's number is twice as many as any other country.

Dr. Francis Collins, who led the Human Genome Project, now leads a competitive "shark tank" enterprise at the National Institutes of Health to discover new ways to conduct tens of millions of additional accurate tests with quick results.

Schools' COVID-19 plans should last for at least a year: The government is pursuing vaccines at warp speed, but no one expects one by August.

In the second half of the school year, schools should be able to provide more tests, more treatments, better contact tracing and we should have vaccines

It will likely be the Fall of 2021 before school life approaches normal.

There are several reasons schools have an advantage in providing a safe environment for students and faculty:

The first reason is that younger people have been less hurt by COVID-19, although Dr. Anthony Fauci has warned against "cavalierly" assuming that young people are not at risk. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says it is "investigating reports of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) associated with coronavirus disease."

Second, schools are generally small communities that are closely supervised and monitored.

Third, outbreaks can be traced – if a child becomes sick, that child's classmates can be tested.

Fourth, individual schools can close to control the spread of the virus – while other schools remain open. Schools are not unfamiliar with outbreaks of flu and other illnesses that have resulted in the temporary closure of individual schools to prevent further spread.

But school environments pose challenges as well:

First, there's not much extra space in a k-12 school to enable distancing—whereas there's a lot of extra space on most college campuses.

Second, school administrators face more rigid rules as a result of state and local regulations and contracts with teachers' unions, so making changes to the academic calendar, class times and class sizes are more difficult.

Third, creating a mask-wearing culture is harder with young children. Seeing facial expressions is also important for young children – they learn to socialize and self-regulate, so obscuring faces with masks prohibits some learning for early elementary school-aged children.

Fourth, rigorous hygiene isn't always easy with children.

Fifth, children go home at night, potentially exposing older adults.

Sixth, even systematic testing of children is a lot of tests.

Today 91.3 percent of families with children have at least one parent employed, and among married families with children, 64.2 percent had both parents employed, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

And many children live in environments where the school is the safest place they'll be all day.

It's also the place where almost 30 million students receive a school lunch—more than 70 percent of those students qualify for free or reduced-priced meals.

Administrators have a responsibility to make our schools among the safest small communities this fall.

In doing so, they will help our country take its surest steps toward normalcy.

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