

How Teachers' Unions Are Influencing Decisions on School Reopenings

By **Madeline Will**

December 2, 2020

Throughout the pandemic, teachers' unions in many states and large districts have played a powerful role in negotiating school closures and reopenings. And with coronavirus cases surging around the nation, the labor groups are continuing to flex their political muscle, most often pushing for a more conservative approach to getting teachers and kids back in buildings. [← Back to Story](#)

While not all districts need to reach an agreement with their unions to resume in-person instruction, they do need teachers to show up. And in many cases, unions are arguing that they do want students to go back, but only when particular safety precautions are in place.

"Teachers' unions have an outsized voice—you can't do reopenings without the teachers," said Bradley Marianno, an assistant professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, who studies educational governance and teachers' unions.

Several statewide teachers' unions, including in Illinois, Maryland, and Wisconsin, have put pressure on their governors to shut down schools across the state or set clear benchmarks that dictate when districts will have to close their doors. Currently, 11 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have state-ordered full or partial closures in effect, [EdWeek has found](#).

Some local union affiliates have been major players in their reopening debates. In some big cities, including Chicago and Washington, D.C., labor groups have spoken out against opening school buildings before they are deemed safe. In Los Angeles, the teachers' union and the district are negotiating what a return to school buildings would look like, with the union pushing back against a hybrid model that would include both in-person and remote instruction.

And the United Federation of Teachers in New York City has been vocal during the twists and turns of the city's school reopening journey. The union first backed the mayor's plan to close schools when the city hit a 3 percent positivity rate—a threshold more conservative than most places in the country—and is now supportive of a phased reopening of schools in parts of the city where transmission rates remain low.

'Balance of Power Is Off'

Many teachers, [fearful of getting COVID-19 at work](#), have said they don't want to go into school buildings, especially as cases in their communities rise. A quarter of all teachers are at increased risk for serious illness if they become infected with the coronavirus, [the Kaiser Family Foundation has found](#), and other teachers say they're scared of bringing the virus home to their high-risk family members.

"The unions have made it pretty clear that they do not want teachers back in school buildings until they're 100 percent sure they're safe," said Katharine Strunk, a professor at Michigan State University who studies education labor markets.

Many public health experts [have said public schools can—and should—safely reopen](#) in communities with low COVID-19 infection rates and with safety protocols in place, and that there are health and academic risks to keeping children home, too. And a vocal contingent of parents has called for schools to stay open, in some cases clashing with the teachers' unions.

"Educators and teachers' unions are not infectious disease experts or public health officials, and frankly, that's who parents trust in making these decisions," said Keri Rodrigues, the founding president of the National Parents Union, an advocacy organization with hundreds of parent groups across the country.

Often, teachers' unions are the loudest voices at the decision-making table, Rodrigues said.

"The balance of power is off," she said. "It's very striking to us as parents and families—we have a group of elected officials who make deals with labor unions and decide what policies we're going to do, and we're just supposed to take it and be on the roller coaster ride."

There are also plenty of parents who support unions' efforts to keep schools remote until virus conditions have improved. Many families, especially those in communities of color, are reluctant to send their children into school buildings just yet. And the unions' rhetoric has struck a chord with them.

"I think the rallying cry of, 'If one teacher dies, isn't that too many?' is a pretty strong argument," Strunk said.

Placing Blame

Union leaders say the narrative that they're acting as obstructionists and pushing to keep schools closed is unfair. They say they're only asking for reopenings to be done safely.

"What we're seeing now is just a typical anti-union, anti-teacher animus," said Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers. "We've been pretty clear about what is needed [to reopen schools safely], but what is needed has not been a priority. Now there's blame [directed at] us that the powers that be didn't prioritize what is needed."

Weingarten said she's been pushing for safeguards in schools, such as mask-wearing, proper ventilation, and testing, since the spring. And those safeguards have proven to work, at least when cases in the community are under control, she said: "Elementary schools in particular are not super-spreaders."

Even so, a couple of early studies have suggested that teachers' unions are driving school districts' reopening decisions more so than COVID-19 infection rates in the community.

One working paper by two political science professors **looked at more than 10,000 school districts' reopening plans** for this school year and found that districts with stronger unions, as measured by district size and whether there's collective bargaining, were less likely to hold in-person classes. (Experts note that district size is not a fail-safe measure of union strength.)

A policy brief published by the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty, a conservative firm, examined the reopening decisions in more than 400 Wisconsin school districts and found that districts with a teachers' union were more likely to continue remote classes this fall. Community infection rates did not play a significant role in the decision to reopen, the paper asserted. (About half of districts in the state have a local teachers' union.)

"There's tremendous concern among educators and parents that these decisions are not being made with student well-being and educator safety first and foremost—that the heated political rhetoric overshadows responsible decision-making to keep educators and students safe," said Colin Sharkey, the executive director of the Association of American Educators, a nonunion professional organization for teachers.

Some AAE members, Sharkey said, are concerned about the detrimental effect remote learning can have on vulnerable students, especially students with special needs. They want to teach in person, and they feel like some of the heated union rhetoric doesn't speak for them, Sharkey said, pointing to protests where some teachers **carried tombstones** to warn of possible teacher deaths due to the virus if schools reopen.

A few teachers' unions, such as the Fairfax Education Association in northern Virginia, have pushed for schools to remain closed until there's a vaccine or highly effective treatment in wide circulation.

"We are drawing a line by protecting our members," FEA President Kimberly Adams **told the Associated Press**.

'You're Not Negotiating'

AFT's Weingarten said waiting for a vaccine before going back to classrooms is a stance that goes too far. But in some places, she said, districts have not prioritized the well-being of school staff, and unions have been forced to draw a hard line against reopening schools.

Weingarten said districts need to ensure that teachers who are at high-risk for serious illness due to COVID-19, or who have family members at home who are at high-risk, are given an alternative work assignment. But some districts have not agreed to allow teachers to work remotely, citing staffing challenges.

"Then, what a union starts doing [is saying], 'Since you're not negotiating this, maybe the default position is for all of us to be remote,'" Weingarten said.

In Washington, D.C., the teachers' union **rejected a deal** to reopen schools over concerns that teachers would be required to work in their classrooms. The tentative agreement had said teaching in person would be optional for all teachers until February. Then, teachers without medical exemptions would have to return to school buildings if enough students opted in to in-person learning and not enough teachers volunteered to come back.

"With cases of COVID rising across the region and without clear guidance from the mayor as to what level of spread would cause our schools to close, we cannot move forward with an agreement that could force anyone, regardless of preexisting conditions or their living situations, back into an in-person classroom," said Washington Teachers Union President Elizabeth Davis in a statement.

Opening Despite Opposition

In some districts, teachers' unions do not have to sign off on a back-to-school plan, and district leaders can proceed with reopening schools regardless of labor opposition.

For example, the Baltimore Teachers Union has opposed a return to in-person instruction until school buildings are deemed completely safe. Yet Baltimore city schools resumed in-person instruction for small groups of at-risk students in about 25 schools last month, although the district temporarily went back to full remote instruction after Thanksgiving until Dec. 7 over fears of a post-holiday outbreak.

"BTU is not simply opposing what the district wants to do for the sake of opposition; we have legitimate health concerns," **the union said on its website**. "The district has refused to bargain with the BTU over the most substantive issues of when and how schools will reopen, and the system is hastily shifting groups of students and staff to in-person instruction without taking the necessary precautions."

The Utah Education Association, meanwhile, asked the governor to require all secondary schools in areas of high COVID-19 transmission to go remote through winter break or until cases significantly decline. However, UEA President Heidi Matthews acknowledged in a statement that the feelings of members on whether to shut down schools "run the gamut."

A survey of UEA members found that 42 percent said all school buildings across the state should temporarily close, while another 42 percent said those decisions should be made on a local level, **KSL TV reported**. Only 16 percent of teachers across the state supported a statewide job action, such as a sickout.

Late last month, Cheryl Bost, the president of the Maryland State Education Association, **wrote a letter** to State Superintendent Karen Salmon, asking her to close schools through at least mid-January to "get through the holiday season with clarity and consistency," and then reevaluate based on health metrics and whether safety measures are in place.

"We're basing that on what we're hearing from our educators," Bost said. "When we see the cases on the rise, [and] we don't see an investment in health and safety protocols that are needed, educators don't

feel like they're being heard."

There's been some backlash, she said, but these are necessary measures to make educators feel more confident and to keep schools open long-term.

"Many of our educators say, 'We were treated as heroes in the spring, and then we were demonized in the fall,'" Bost said. "I think people forget that our educators have their families, too, and they are trying—it is very stressful. They're trying to make it work, they really, really are."

WEB ONLY