

# **Coalition of Milwaukee community organizations: Demands immediate action to protect MPS students, families, workers and our communities**

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MILWAUKEE – Milwaukee community organizations including the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association (MTEA), Leaders Igniting Transformation (LIT), Black Leaders Organizing Communities (BLOC), Voces de la Frontera, Youth Empowered in the Struggle (YES), Parents for Public Schools (PPS) Milwaukee, Schools and Communities United (SCU), the Working Families Party and Citizen Action of Wisconsin issued the following joint statement demanding action from our elected leaders and public health officials to protect Wisconsinites from COVID-19:

Milwaukee Public Schools and numerous other school districts have taken the important step of protecting students and their families. MPS started the school year virtually and has taken affirmative steps to improve on virtual instruction, Phase 1 of their pandemic reopening plan. We will continue to press MPS to do better within the constraints of virtual instruction. But too many other school districts, private schools, colleges, and universities have made decisions to return to face-to-face instruction with negative results. Schools should not be open in the midst of uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 because it is unsafe for students, their families, and for public school employees. It is also just bad public health policy.

Federal, state, and local governments have failed to control the spread of COVID-19.

Political leaders have prioritized reopening the economy, including restaurants and bars, and have struck down public safety measures designed to keep us safe. We have seen enough.

We call on the Wisconsin Department of Health Services to immediately order all Wisconsin K-12 schools, colleges, and universities to begin virtual instruction with no face-to-face instruction until community spread of the virus is contained. Required gating criteria for school reopenings should be provided by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services and each school district, private school, college, and university must have a reopening plan approved by DHS experts. DHS should confirm that plans are feasible and the district, school, college or university does in fact have the necessary PPE and resources to accomplish the reopening plan. Upon reopening, DHS should coordinate with local public health authorities to conduct regular inspections.

As we have demanded before, community spread of the virus must be stopped before we can safely reopen schools. Our public schools' eventual safe reopening is dependent on a societal response. You must:

- Expand free testing which is accessible to all communities, especially low-income and Black and Brown communities that have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. More must be done to actively encourage people to access testing.
- Contact tracing must be sufficient to trace and isolate individuals who are exposed to COVID-19.
- We must see 21 consecutive days of a downward trajectory of documented cases, hospitalizations, and positivity rates (near zero incidence) in Milwaukee County.
- There must be consistent monitoring of the reproductive rate of COVID-19 to ensure that the rate does not rise above 1 (anything more than 1 demonstrates community spread).
- Exact gating criteria with objective metrics and timelines must be established to ensure that we reopen safely and that students, staff, and families have clear expectations.

We call on the City of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County to:

- Demand WE Energies continue power to all Milwaukee families and reverse any recent disconnections.
- Demand that Spectrum and AT&T provide free basic internet to all Milwaukee families for the duration of the pandemic.
- Return to earlier restrictions that had slowed the spread of the virus, including stricter restrictions on restaurants and bars. If we value schools and educating our students, society must prioritize them.

We also call on the Milwaukee Public Schools to continue to improve their pandemic plan. We continue to advance the following demands:

- Encourage students and their families and MPS staff and their families to utilize free COVID-19 testing and continue outreach to encourage flu vaccinations.
- MPS must continue to improve virtual instruction and must support their educators with high quality training and professional development focused on virtual instruction, culturally relevant pedagogy, and restorative practices, along other topics that are not one-size-fits-all.
- MPS employees must have virtual working conditions that allow for appropriate planning and ample time for student support.
- COVID-19 sick leave should be established prior to the potential expiration of the CARES Act so that employees have no fear of self reporting symptoms and staying home and getting tested.
- Students rely on their school social networks for support. Milwaukee students suffer great trauma without a global pandemic which only compounds that trauma. We have not done enough to prioritize and provide mental health and social emotional support to our students and families during the pandemic.
- English as a Second Language/English Language Learners and Newcomer/Refugee students cannot be an afterthought. Additional resources and staff are needed to ensure they have an equal education.
- Standardized testing must be halted.
- Student schedules and workloads must be carefully balanced with the demands of altered home lives, stress, and work. Many of our students have become caregivers, childcare providers, and/or family wage earners during the pandemic. We must accommodate these demands.