



CHICAGO
TEACHERS
UNION

An open letter to Chicago public school parents from the Chicago Teachers Union

We understand the past nine months have been difficult times for you, and for our entire city. We are in the midst of a global pandemic that has taken more than 450,000 lives in the U.S — among them the lives of family, friends, colleagues and students.

These losses, and the fear of more illness and death from COVID, is the basis of our work toward a safe return to classrooms for Chicago Public Schools. Our teaching has never stopped. You've seen your teachers, clinicians, counselors, PSRPs and librarians working with your children since March. Our students have continued to learn, remotely, in spaces that are safe.

And that's what our members' fight is about — safety.

Mayor Lori Lightfoot and CPS leadership have unilaterally tried to impose a plan to return educators and students to in-person learning without involving our members, principals, students or parents. Unlike school districts across the country, and unionized charter schools in Chicago, CPS for a long time refused to bargain regarding its reopening plan. Yes, we have had 70 meetings, but for 10 months, we never had a willing partner on the other side of the table.

Initial CPS proposals lacked many of the basic safety elements found in other school districts, like COVID testing and contact tracing, health and safety metrics, and protocols for the inevitable school closures that will result from reopening buildings without control of community spread. It wasn't until educators voted overwhelmingly to take collective action that CPS leadership showed some urgency about negotiating the critical details of its plan.

All through this period, red flag after red flag has been raised. We've seen CPS leadership fail to meet its own meager safety protocols, and fail to provide the PPE, deep cleaning and adequate ventilation it promised. Positive COVID-19 cases began to climb [as just a handful of students and staff returned to our buildings last month.](#)

Like our members, you have witnessed decades of broken promises from CPS, which have hit our most vulnerable Black and Brown communities the hardest — much like the coronavirus. More than two-thirds of families opted out of returning to school buildings. Perhaps you didn't trust the plans in place, or perhaps the COVID threat was just too great. Parents in our most vulnerable communities have borne the brunt of this pandemic in every way.

We have won some agreements in the last week that establish real school safety measures we can hold the district accountable for, and that make a difference in the health of every student and adult who enter our buildings. Our unity, and solidarity from Local School Councils, elected officials, clergy, labor partners, community partners, educators across the country and President Joe Biden have helped move the district to make tangible progress that protects lives.

Mayor Lightfoot and CPS leadership mocked us when we raised the needs of families beyond the classroom, like support for rental assistance and investment in resources to keep communities safe in a pandemic. CPS has yet to provide any path for our families to access vaccinations through our school communities. The district continues to refuse to address challenges of remote learning, despite months of pleas from parents, students and educators, and has yet to provide a clear path for providing desperately needed social-emotional supports for students.

CPS and the mayor are still threatening to lock out teachers and shut students out of all learning if we don't capitulate on critical outstanding safety issues. We sincerely hope that doesn't happen. Thousands of our members are also CPS parents. We love your children. We desperately want to be back in classrooms with them, but we are not willing to accept the inevitable illness and death a reckless reopening will inflict on our city.

We cannot return to in-person instruction until we have made more progress with the district on CDC-based health metrics, allowing educators with medically vulnerable family members to continue to teach remotely, and addressing real equity needs for the vast majority of our students — particularly Black and Latinx students who continue to learn remotely.

Our members live in communities with the families they serve, and recognize the turmoil that this pandemic has wrought. Educators have sacrificed for nearly a year to bring learning, nurturing and care to each and every student despite the gravest obstacles. We've worked with parents and grassroots allies to bring mutual aid to school communities and neighborhoods in need. We want nothing more than a return to normal. But these are far from normal times, and we are prepared to sacrifice even more to ensure real equity and safety for all.

We won't stop advocating, and we won't stop fighting until we win what our members, our students and their families deserve: a school reopening model that protects us all and gives you the confidence to send your children back into classrooms to safely learn and grow.

In solidarity,
Chicago Teachers Union