



## Open Letter to Superintendent Contreras and the Guilford County Board of Education from the Guilford County Association of Educators

September 23, 2020

*"We want to make sure that we are not unnecessarily putting anyone's child, my child, your child, or our fellow educator colleagues in harm's way by rushing to reopen when we can do it in a safe measured way,"*  
- Tamika Walker Kelly, NCAE President

Dear Superintendent and Board,

As employees of Guilford County Schools working daily in our schools with the risk of exposure to COVID-19, **we request to remain in Plan C with any return to in-person instruction being voluntary**, staggered, and resourced with proper equipment like N95 masks and adequate ventilation. Furthermore, all employees and parents should be made thoroughly aware of the potential risk of COVID-19 transmission in their school.

### The Risks

While many of the [long-term effects of COVID-19](#) are still unknown, we know the potential for long-lasting problems makes reducing disease spread vitally important. The [Mayo Clinic's list of long-term effects](#) of COVID-19 that linger over time includes fatigue, cough, shortness of breath, headache, and joint pain. The virus may also affect the heart, lungs, and brain, causing seizures, strokes, and temporary paralysis even in young people. We also have seen that these risks are [far higher for children of color](#).


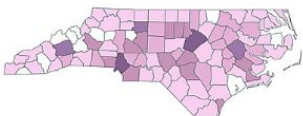



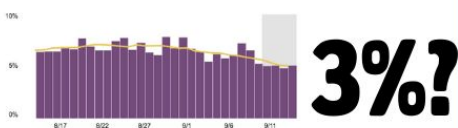

Based on CDC criteria for increased risk for infection, as many as [51% of all school employees nationwide](#) are at higher risk. Of the more than 10,000 employees in Guilford County Schools, what percentage have either self-identified with an underlying health condition or fall in the age range for increased risk? Of those at a higher risk, how many are not working at Guilford eLearning Virtual Academy or Guilford eLearning University Prep and will therefore be required to deliver face to face instruction when their students return to buildings?

We acknowledge that decisions about reopening should ideally be made by public health professionals as part of a national and state coordinated response, and we understand the burden placed on local school boards that are now tasked with making public health decisions in the absence of this leadership.

Given the seriousness of COVID-19 and the high level of contagion, it is critical that key questions around sick leave, disability leave, and other workers' compensation issues are answered prior to GCS staff returning under high-risk conditions. Put simply: basic workplace protections must be in place before any school reopens.

**A,B,C**

In alignment with the statewide NCAE's "ABC's" for safe school reopening, and the "1, 2, 3" demands in our statewide petition with over 18,000 signatures, GCAE is proposing the following minimum conditions be met for any GCS school to reopen to students:

<b>COVID-19 SCHOOL REOPENING ABC SAFETY CHECKLIST</b> 		STANDARD MET? <b>YES/NO</b>
<b>A</b> Awareness	 Accurate public school transmission dashboard & clear notification protocols	
<b>B</b> Breathe Safely	 Does the school have proper ventilation? Have employees been provided N95 masks?	
<b>C</b> Control COVID-19	 3% or lower test positivity rate?	

**A - Awareness**

Transparency is a critical tool to prevent transmission of COVID-19 in our schools. To help families, staff, and decision-makers make safe choices in quickly changing conditions, we need a county dashboard with accurate, timely data, and clear notification protocols for this information to be communicated to staff, students, and families.

**B - Breathe Safely**

We now know that COVID-19 is spread primarily through aerosols in the air, and that spread is increased by common school activities such as talking or singing. To protect students, staff, and our community, we need both protective masks and safe ventilation in our school buildings.

1. *Masks*

Cloth masks like those provided to GCS employees limit aerosol spread from the wearer to others but are not sufficient to protect the wearer from pathogens. Therefore, cloth masks only work when EVERYONE wears them with fidelity. Can we expect students, particularly our youngest ones, to do that consistently enough that GCS can guarantee employee safety? An N95 mask costs \$5-6 a day (cheaper if the state would buy them) and protects the wearer. If we are going to prioritize in-person learning, appropriate PPE should be a priority.

2. *Ventilation*

The 2019 joint facilities study co-sponsored by GCS & the Guilford County Commissioners showed that more than 50 percent of GCS buildings are in poor or unsatisfactory condition, many due to failing HVAC systems. It is not news to anyone that the AC and heat go out regularly in our schools - and

[GCS is not the only district](#) facing significant challenges in this area due to underfunding. Now we are facing a virus transmitted through the air and addressing widespread ventilation issues is even more urgent.

### C - Control COVID-19

As of today, NC has not adopted a clear standard for "safe" COVID metrics for public schools, though GCS is proposing adopting the state goal of a test positivity rate of 5% or below for 14 days. We applaud GCS in naming clear metrics for re-entry and agree with GCS that this should be the responsibility of State Health, not local school boards, but think the [goal should be 3% or below](#) for 14 days, then staying in the 3-5% range after that. Our reasoning is aligned with the most recent [CDC recommendations for schools](#) and the [Harvard study](#). Less than or equal to a three percent test positivity rate is thought to be on the downward side of community spread. We want to be back with our students, but closing down is so disruptive for both families and staff that it is worth doing right the first time; we don't want to ping-pong back and forth.

We ask that GCS set as the standard the metric named by the CDC as at "lowest risk of transmission":

**CDC indicators and thresholds for risk of introduction and transmission of COVID-19 in schools**

INDICATORS	Lowest risk of transmission in schools	Lower risk of transmission in schools	Moderate risk of transmission in schools	Higher risk of transmission in schools	Highest risk of transmission in schools
CORE INDICATORS					
Number of new cases per 100,000 persons within the last 14 days*	<5	5 to <20	20 to <50	50 to ≤ 200	>200
Percentage of RT-PCR tests that are positive during the last 14 days**	<3%	3% to <5%	5% to <8%	8% to ≤ 10%	>10%




### 1,2,3

GCAE endorses the statewide [NCAE Our Safety. Our Say Petition](#) aimed at the NC General Assembly which over 17 thousand people have signed to date. Our collective voice played a huge role in ensuring all NC school districts now have hold-harmless provisions on Average Daily Membership (ADM), staving off what could have been an unconscionable round of layoffs and budget cuts. At its core, this petition can be distilled down to three key demands, our "1, 2, 3":

# COVID-19 SCHOOL REOPENING 123 SAFETY CHECKLIST

OUR SCHOOLS,  
OUR SAFETY,  
OUR SAY!!!

CHECK  
YES/NO

<b>1<sup>st</sup></b> Petition Issue	Maintain at least 2019-20 levels of funding and staffing for the 2020-21 school year	
<b>2<sup>nd</sup></b> Petition Issue	Fully fund the requirements for reopening of schools determined by the State Department of Health and Human Services as specified in the Strong Schools Public Health Toolkit	
<b>3<sup>rd</sup></b> Petition Issue	Decision making bodies meet with public school employees, convened by NCAE	 (somewhat)

## 1 - No Cuts in a Crisis

Maintain at least 2019-20 levels of funding and staffing for the 2020-21 school year.

## 2 - Provide for a SAFE Reopening

Fully fund the requirements for reopening of schools determined by the State Department of Health and Human Services as specified in the Strong Schools Public Health Toolkit.

Once we succeed at lowering COVID metrics to the lowest risk levels, it is still important to note that there is simply not enough physical space for all students to return at once and maintain proper social distancing. Given that high schoolers are the most likely to transmit the disease like adults, there is limited space, and they can best work independently, high school should be staggered to re-enter last (at the very earliest, January 2021).

## 3 - Listen to Educators

Direct appropriate decision-making bodies to meet with public school employees, convened by the North Carolina Association of Educators, for the purpose of co-creating conditions of re-entry that respect the concerns of our students, families, and staff (i.e. safety, healthcare, teaching and learning, racial and economic justice, etc.). This conversation is especially critical given the constantly changing science and the importance of educators' insight into what is happening on the ground.

The "A, B, C" standards above reflect our evolving understanding of how to most effectively operationalize the requirements laid out in the Strong Schools Toolkit. As the science around COVID-19 changes, so do our priorities and practices. While we still want the requirement of the toolkit to be met, we believe it should be updated to reflect the most current science, especially regarding the emerging scientific consensus that COVID-19 is airborne and the implications that has for school systems such as ours with shockingly inadequate HVAC.

## Facing Crisis Together

We're in a full-on crisis that demands triage and task prioritization. We can keep all of us safe, but it's not going to be comfortable or pretty.

There is not going to be any perfect online teaching. We're doing the best we can with many educators working 60-70 hours a week trying to get online instruction right. But the truth is, there is no perfect Canvas lesson. No one wants to be back in school more than educators. We know how badly our students need school. Not just for the academics, but also for routine, for food, for counseling, for coaching, for reassurance, and for love.

Unfortunately, the truth is that no matter how much we want to return, COVID-19 will disrupt that return if we don't do it right. Students and staff will get sick. Some will die. Some will have long term health complications from the disease.

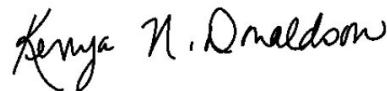
What we need is real leadership that helps to both lower the level of COVID-19 in our communities *and* negotiate a truly safe reopening of our public schools that is rooted in science and fully resourced. As the people who will ultimately be at risk when we return to in-person instruction, we are asking you to be the leaders we need.

Signed-

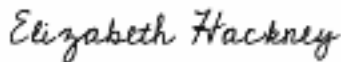
Todd Warren, GCAE President



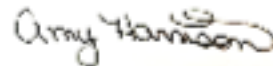
Kenya Donaldson, GCAE Vice President



Elizabeth Hackney, GCAE Secretary



Amy Harrison, GCAE Treasurer



Crystal Satterfield, GCAE Primary School Director



Karen Meacham, GCAE Elementary School Director



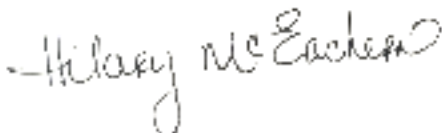
Riley Driver, GCAE Middle School Director



Deb Greene, GCAE Middle School Director



Hilary McEachern, GCAE High School Director



Shana Richards, GCAE Student Services Director



## **Resources guiding our thinking:**

### **All Hands On Deck: Guidance Regarding Reopening School Buildings**

<https://educatingthroughcrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/All-Hands-on-Deck-7-22-20.pdf>

Our guidance is rooted in four basic principles:

1. Health Expertise: Health and safety of all as advised by science is fundamental.
2. Educator Voice: Educators' voices and expertise are front and center as part of decision-making and implementation.
3. Access to Protection: Educators and students need consistently funded access to personal protective equipment (PPE) and the ability to disinfect surfaces regularly.
4. Leading with Equity: Achieving racial and social justice is imperative and not an expendable aspiration.

### **NEA's Checklist for Safely and Equitably Reopening Schools and Campus Buildings**

<https://educatingthroughcrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/NEA-Where-We-Stand.pdf>

### **Six steps to slowing airborne aerosol coronavirus transmission**

<https://www.uchealth.org/today/six-steps-to-slowing-airborne-aerosol-coronavirus-transmission/>

### **Should Schools in Your County Be Open?**

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/08/14/opinion/politics/covid-school-reopening-guidelines.html?fbclid=IwAR336NyNBW3MNiSDZCQRzycIB0VXFC0mbge5fr8wROOuOP5b5l8jskDpy0Q>

### **COVID-19 Is Transmitted Through Aerosols. We Have Enough Evidence, Now It Is Time to Act**

<https://time.com/5883081/covid-19-transmitted-aerosols/>

### **Low-cost measurement of face mask efficacy for filtering expelled droplets during speech**

<https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/6/36/eabd3083>

### **Evidence Roundup: Why positive test rates need to fall below 3%**

<https://globalhealth.harvard.edu/evidence-roundup-why-positive-test-rates-need-to-fall-below-3/>

### **Schools for Health: Risk Reduction Strategies for Reopening Schools**

<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/06/harvard-expert-outlines-recommendations-for-school-reopenings/>

### **CDC Indicators for Dynamic School Decision-Making**

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/indicators.html>

### **Schools For Health: COVID-19**

<https://schools.forhealth.org/>