



TENNESSEE ALLIANCE FOR  
**EQUITY IN  
EDUCATION**  
Powered by The Education Trust in Tennessee

September 9, 2021

Dr. Penny Schwinn, Commissioner  
Tennessee Department of Education  
710 James Robertson Parkway  
Nashville, TN 37243

Dear Commissioner Schwinn,

We, the undersigned, as members of the [Tennessee Alliance for Equity in Education](#), believe that Tennessee must act with urgency to protect our children and their ability to attend school safely and in person. Our collective mission is to ensure that Tennessee's students thrive and succeed in every corner of the state and one of the key priorities in our [shared policy agenda](#) is to "address the impact of COVID-19 on student learning and well-being." We believe that we share that priority with the Tennessee Department of Education (the Department) as well.

The COVID-19 crisis has disrupted education for all Tennessee students, but it has hit our most vulnerable populations the hardest, including students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, students learning English, and students with disabilities.<sup>1</sup> There is clear evidence that the impact of the pandemic on children has been and will continue to be substantial, and the effects are likely to be detrimental to students' long-term academic success unless they are offered both effective and targeted strategies.

We believe students are best served by in-person learning. However, this pandemic is surging to new heights, with the Tennessee Department of Health recently reporting that children represent nearly 40% of all positive cases in our state, and Tennessee has recently led the nation in pediatric COVID cases per 100,000.<sup>2</sup> Far too many students and teachers across the state are missing school this fall, with more than 25 districts

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/tcap/spring-2021/TN-AcademicPerformance2020-2021.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://data.tn.gov/t/Public/views/CasesAmong518YearOlds/TableofSchool-AgedCOVIDCases?:showAppBanner=false&:display\\_count=n&:showVizHome=n&:origin=viz\\_share\\_link&:toolbar=no&:embed=yes](https://data.tn.gov/t/Public/views/CasesAmong518YearOlds/TableofSchool-AgedCOVIDCases?:showAppBanner=false&:display_count=n&:showVizHome=n&:origin=viz_share_link&:toolbar=no&:embed=yes)

having closed due to the rising case numbers and subsequent quarantining. Given the current state-mandated limits on virtual learning, when entire school districts close without additional options for learning, they are forced to halt instruction entirely for all students, including the most vulnerable.

Schools in Tennessee learned valuable lessons about teaching students remotely when we made the pivot to virtual learning last year as well as procedures for mitigating the spread of the virus. We now have many more tools and strategies at our disposal, which must be fully allowed and utilized. Parents across the state, including parents we represent, are fearful of sending their children to school under the current protocols, and are frustrated by the lack of learning when schools are closed.

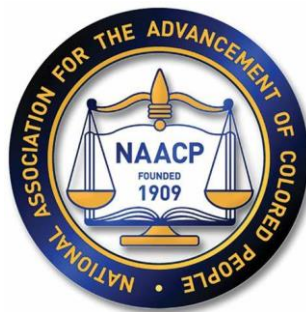
We appreciate the steps you have taken to address some of the challenges districts, schools, students, and families are currently facing. However, to further mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on student health and learning, we urge you to do the following:

- Provide additional guidance on the Department's temporary virtual school waiver application process, including:
  - Offering clarity on eligibility criteria and transparency on review and approval procedures
  - Providing timely responses so districts may plan in order to avoid a penalty or the loss of stockpiled days
  - Clarifying that districts can request a pivot to remote learning for individual schools, including up to the total number of schools in their district in order to stop or slow the spread of the virus or in response to inadequate staffing
- Offer guidance to district leaders and educators, including:
  - For districts that have already closed without a waiver, providing clarity on the 180-day instructional threshold given the impact on school closures and stockpiled days, and
  - District flexibility on the use or waiver of sick and personal leave requirements for COVID-19 related staff absences, including quarantine
- Heed the expertise of healthcare professionals and provide the means for schools to use all of the tools at their disposal, which include guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and the recent recommendations to Governor Lee by the Tennessee Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, including:
  - Encouraging vaccines and making them readily available for Tennesseans ages 12 and up

- Masking inside schools
- Providing accessible testing for COVID-19
- Contact tracing and quarantining
- Proper ventilation and social distancing

As education organizations representing all three of Tennessee’s grand divisions, we share a deep commitment to student learning and wellbeing and are ready and willing to offer our partnership to you in devising solutions for the benefit of children and schools. We urge you to work hand in hand with districts and school leaders, offering clear guidance so that students can learn safely and in person. Our state’s families and educators are counting on strong, strategic leadership, and we believe that our state can and must do more to protect them and provide consistent instruction during this challenging time.

Respectfully, the following members of the TN Alliance for Equity in Education;







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