

Tiffany Dittrich  
President  
White Bear Lake Area Educators  
Senate Education Committee  
Jan. 6, 2021

Hello. My name is Tiffany Dittrich. I've taught language arts at White Bear Lake Area High School for twenty-three years before stepping into my current role as president of the White Bear Lake Area Educators, Local #7286.

Like your constituents, my members hold a variety of views on when and how students and staff should return to school. Despite those differing views, we all agree that in-person learning is best for our students –when it's safe for them and the educators who work with them. In the fall, White Bear Lake Area Educators adopted its official position that we must prioritize safety, consistency, and instructional quality while navigating the many changes of this school year. Those remain our priorities today.

No matter how desperately we want our children to return to classrooms, we must acknowledge that we remain in the pernicious grip of a global pandemic. In many areas, community spread remains high and too many teachers and school staff are getting sick, quarantining or leaving the profession as a result, which is why so many schools can't reopen – they don't have enough adults to staff the buildings. Finding qualified substitutes in these situations is simply not an option as Minnesota, along with the rest of the nation, suffered a serious substitute shortage even before the pandemic.

The challenges our schools have faced as a result of this pandemic persist all while a new, even more contagious strain of the virus emerges. Unfortunately, for Minnesota's students and their families, inconsistent learning models have been a hallmark of this school year. If we fail to do this right and reopen to full, in-person learning too soon, they will face even more inconsistency. Our students and their parents need stability and for schools to *stay* open, not the back-and-forth between learning models that occur as a result of exposure. We must exercise caution until the vaccine is readily available to all who work in schools, which will then provide a sustainable path for a full return in the future.

Until then, don't underestimate the talent and commitment of Minnesota's educators who have and will continue to deliver high-quality learning experiences for our children while we also prioritize safety.

While science has shown that children are far less likely to experience serious illness and long-term side effects from COVID-19, the same cannot be said for the adults who work with them in schools. And our educators are getting sick. Just yesterday I received an update from a member diagnosed with COVID in early October. She had taken every precaution recommended by health officials to avoid contracting the virus. She wore her mask and limited her time away from home to only essential business, like groceries, yet she became sick. Her recovery from the illness is ongoing - she's seen several specialists in the Twin Cities and recently consulted with rehabilitation specialists and a neurologist from the Mayo Clinic in hopes of advancing

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her healing. Unable to return to work because of the ongoing impacts of the virus, she worries for her family's financial well-being and her ability to perform her work as an educator in the future.

Undoubtedly, we all want the highest-quality educational experiences for our students. To ensure that amid the uncertainty of the pandemic, we absolutely must build sustainable solutions. If we rush to bring students back while the virus rages in our communities - our schools won't be open very long. Students and educators will get sick, classes will be required to quarantine, buildings will be forced to close due to staffing shortages, and parents and students will be left scrambling yet again.

As state leaders, I urge you to invest all that is required to guarantee safety, consistency, and instructional quality for our students, their families, and the educators who serve them. The education of our young people is vitally important and reliant upon Minnesota's highly-trained professional educators who trust you and the public they serve to ensure their safety as essential workers during this pandemic. For educators, parents, and everyone who cares about the children of Minnesota, we ask our fellow citizens to please do all they can to slow the spread of this virus. Wear your mask. Keep your distance. Wash your hands. Refrain from spreading disinformation. And please, get the vaccine as soon as it becomes available to you.

What happens next for Minnesota's students, depends on what Minnesotans do next.

Thank you.