



For Immediate Release:

February 2, 2022

**Teachers and School Personnel Support
Masks for All to Protect Students and Staff**

Union leaders representing public education personnel urge state officials continue to follow federal disease control agency guidance to keep school buildings safe and open

Hartford – Teachers, paraeducators, school nurses, custodians, food service and other public education professionals are calling on state officials to “follow the science” when it comes to student and staff safety. Labor leaders representing nearly 60,000 school employees across Connecticut are urging masks be worn by all, regardless of vaccination status, to protect against the latest COVID-19 surge. The call comes as State Board of Education (SBOE) officials consider a possible recommendation to the administration of Governor Ned Lamont at their meeting today.

Statewide school employee cases of COVID-19 on January 19 were 1,533 - double the 763 reported four weeks earlier, according to data compiled by the Connecticut Department of Public Health (DPH) ¹. Student cases during that same period jumped from 3,848 to 9,722 - a 40 percent spike.

“We have remained among the safest states throughout this pandemic because elected leaders have heeded the call to ‘follow the science,’” said AFT Connecticut President Jan Hochadel. “It has provided a reliable road map for the numerous tough decisions we’ve faced as labor leaders and educators. There is no sound reason to veer off course now and put the health and safety of our members and their students at greater risk,” added Hochadel.

“It is vital for the State Board of Education to recommend that the current statewide mask rules not expire,” said Stacie Harris-Byrdsong, president of AFSCME Local 3194, representing paraeducators, lead teachers, and other staff throughout Capitol Region Education Council schools. “When masks are worn by all, it is an extra layer of protection that is essential to making sure students and staff are all safe. Science has shown mask wearing is an important pillar to ensure everyone plays their part in mitigating the spread of COVID-19. Let us not abandon this important lesson we’ve been practicing throughout the entire pandemic,” Harris-Byrdsong, a lead teacher at CREC, added.

¹ <https://data.ct.gov/stories/s/mpdc-p8wg>

“As the SBOE discusses recommending a mask mandate to Governor Lamont and the General Assembly, we would like to remind them of the on-going spike in COVID cases we are seeing in schools,” said Cynthia Ross-Zweig, CSEA SEIU Local 2001 Paraeducator Council President. “As a paraeducator I am in the classroom everyday, risking exposure and illness, but wearing my mask has helped me and my students stay healthy. The science is clear that this highly contagious COVID variant spreads quickly and the best course of protection is an N95 mask.”

“While we are in a much better place than we were earlier this year, the key to keeping infection rates low, schools open, and everyone safe will be continuing state-mandated masking and other mitigation efforts outlined by our public health experts,” said CEA President Kate Dias. “Let's not forget we still have large numbers of unvaccinated students in our classrooms, and COVID sub-variants are proving more transmissible. We must continue to do all we can to keep students and staff safe and schools open.”

“The priority is to keep our students and staff safe,” said Shellye Davis, AFT Connecticut’s vice president for paraprofessionals and school-related personnel (PSRP). “Masks and testing are tools that have proven to work towards achieving that critical objective. The SBOE should recommend extending the current mandate in all our public schools,” added Davis, who also serves as president of the Hartford Federation of Paraeducators, AFT Local 2221.

###

Contacts:

- AFSCME Council 4: Larry Dorman, 860-989-9127, ldorman@council4.org
- AFT Connecticut: Matt O’Connor, 860-221-5696, moconnor@aftct.org
- CT Education Association: Nancy Andrews, 860-819-9924, nancya@cea.org
- CSEA SEIU Local 2001: Drew Stoner, 508-404-7515, dstoner@csea760.com