

To the Senate Education Committee: Thanks for vaccinating teachers. But before schools can reopen safely, they need upgrades to ventilation systems and restrooms, as well as more full time nurses and custodians to protect students, teachers and their families from Covid.

In my last classroom, the “fresh air vent” led straight to the boys’ bathroom. The heat output was so weak that when I installed a filter, the heat stopped altogether. Lacking AC, there was also no way to circulate air when it was hot. Standalone fans aren't a solution because they spread disease. The CDC states airborne transmission is the greatest danger, making school HVAC upgrades are of utmost importance. The CDC even recommends HEPA systems to reduce airborne Covid particles by over 99 percent.

Then let's not forget that half our schools have no nurses and the rest are part time. It often falls to secretaries to take temperatures, issue medications since students aren't allowed to carry any, and find a place to stash sick kids until their parents arrive. Meanwhile, most schools are lucky to have even a single cot, let alone an enclosed infirmary. Our "sick room" was an alcove open to the main office and next to teachers' mailboxes. It's critical to have separate quarantine rooms and fulltime nurses to handle Covid cases. Lots of tests too.

Then there’s the issue of cleanliness. My high school had only two custodians, one daytime and the other nighttime. That meant soap dispensers, TP and paper towels were always out, and there was only enough time to empty the trash once daily and sweep once weekly. In the meantime, bathrooms weren't equipped with hot water taps for the proper hand washing necessary to prevent Covid spread. Schools need restroom upgrades, as well more personnel for the daily, if not hourly, cleaning of doorknobs, desks, sink handles, toilets, showers, drinking fountains, etc.

My experience of having 225 students rotate through my tiny classroom was that everyone caught each others' viruses. Why would Covid be any different? Indeed, the largest study to date, Princeton's analysis of over 575,000 subjects, found that children are actually super spreaders! Kids are responsible for one third of all cases! Although not likely to become as sick as adults, students can still infect their teachers and families, placing older folks and those with underlying health conditions at risk of complications or death. Multigenerational households and families of color are disproportionately affected.

Reference: “Largest COVID 19 contact tracing study to date finds children key to spread, evidence of super spreaders” Morgan Kelly, Princeton Environmental Institute, Sept. 30, 2020

There can be no doubt, schools must have HVAC and restroom upgrades, as well as more nurses and custodians before they can reopen safely. Teachers and parents are awaiting reassurance that every protective measure has been taken before students return.

Sincerely,
Rachel Rich