

June 30, 2020

Dear Members of the Economic Recovery Task Force:

First of all, thank you for stepping up to serve on this important committee. We all know this pandemic has impacted us all in a multitude of ways, and we all feel the economic impact of this virus. We share your deep concern for the economic well being and health of our great state.

We were pleased the MEA had a representative able to attend the Education and Workforce Subcommittee panel on Friday, June 26th. In the spirit of continued dialogue and collaboration, we would like to provide some initial feedback to the “Quick Start Recommendations Under Consideration” that was distributed on June 26th.

The MEA represents 24,000 educators in our state, including teachers and educators in nearly every single public school and the faculty and other professional staff in the University of Maine and Community College systems. We too share the Committee’s desire to re-open schools and we agree public education is a huge economic priority for our state. We appreciate the focus in the document on safely re-opening schools. The key word is ‘safely’. The MEA will advocate for our members and students to have the protections they need to safely return to work and school, and we encourage the Task Force to amplify the importance of re-opening schools **ONLY** when it is safe to do so for educators and students, and when all appropriate safety protocols have been put in place.

The MEA has collaborated fully with the Maine Department of Education and our friends across public education. Our joint efforts have minimized disruption in the field by identifying issues early and developing statewide solutions. Our labor-management discussions at the state level help provide continuity and support to educators all over the state. The Task Force should recognize the great collaborative work MEA, MDOE and the other stakeholders have done and allow this process to continue to work. These groups are in regular communication and continue to monitor all recent developments, including the latest science on the spread of COVID-19 in school communities across the globe. The framework released by the Maine Department of Education, in collaboration with stakeholders, was purposefully posted as a working DRAFT, and the Maine Department of Education intends to continue to work with stakeholders to adjust the draft as needed, due to changes in the science or the spread of the virus. We should continue to allow this process to play out and make adjustments to the framework as needed. Setting arbitrary dates or putting pressure on schools to re-open will only cause districts to make rash decisions, instead of well thought out ones.

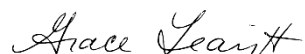
We appreciate the focus the Task Force has provided to the need for additional funding for schools in order to re-open but we ask the Task Force to consider this as its primary recommendation. Schools simply will not be able to open safely without additional resources. Schools will need extensive amounts of PPE for educators and students. Schools will need improvements to infrastructure to address issues such as proper ventilation. We will need smaller class sizes and more frequent bus runs. We will need more technology to transition to remote learning during outbreaks. We will need professional development to ensure that educators are prepared for more than “emergency” remote instruction. Teachers and others may require accommodations in order to return. And while we can expect sharp declines in state revenue due to the economic impacts of COVID, we simply must protect current and projected state aid for public schools. The recent municipal budget cycle demonstrated there is no appetite among city leaders or voters to raise property taxes. Any cuts in state aid will only exacerbate financial challenges for schools, since few can expect they will be able to make up any cuts with local revenues (i.e., property tax increases). Any cuts to state aid for schools will only compound the struggle to open schools safely. We hope this Task Force shares this most pressing concern.

Many educators across the state are hard at work planning with administrators, parents and school board members for what school may look like in the Fall. We applaud the school districts that have engaged teachers, educators and parents in this discussion. But we urge this Task Force to continue to allow the local communities to do their work and their planning. Nobody wants to be back in the classroom more than our teachers. But we want to do so safely for our students, for ourselves, and for our entire communities. We support the ongoing efforts to collaborate with the other educational leaders in this state, and hope this Task Force will show support for the educators in the field doing their best under these most challenging of circumstances.

The MEA has produced our own internal guidance for the re-opening of schools and we are sharing this information with educators around the state. You can find our [MEA guidance here](#).

Again, we so appreciate your leadership during this unprecedented time, and we appreciate the importance the Task Force has placed on our public schools. If we can be helpful in any way, please do not hesitate to reach out.

In Unity,



Grace Leavitt

President, Maine Education Association