



Jenni Benson, President

Maddie Fennell, NBCT, Executive Director

July 21, 2020

Dear Governor Ricketts:

We are just a few short weeks from the start of the school year and teachers across the state are eager to reconnect with their students. Yet, if we cannot do so with the appropriate health measures in place and enforced, the lives of students and all school staff are at risk. Trying to open schools without adequately protecting students and staff from COVID-19 will backfire. It is putting livelihoods before lives. Platitudes and requests for compliance won't keep our students safe.

Citizens across the state saw the legislature reconvene this week, speaking behind clear partitions to provide for social distancing. These same precautions, and more, need to be taken in schools across the state. As governor, you must immediately take the necessary steps to provide sufficient funding to meet PPE needs for our students and staff.

The NSEA is in complete agreement with the American Academy of Pediatrics that children older than 2 should wear masks in schools, unless wearing a cloth face covering may exacerbate a physical or mental health condition, lead to a medical emergency, or introduce significant safety concerns. Just last Tuesday, the Centers for Disease Control Director Dr. Robert Redfield said, "If all of us would put on a face covering now for the next 4-6 weeks, we could drive this epidemic to the ground."

Your unwillingness to issue such a mandate or support the science of such a mandate from a local health board is irresponsible and a dereliction of duty. We urgently ask you to reconsider your stance and support local health boards and local school boards when they require masks be worn to help ensure the health and safety of children, school staff and their communities.

Sadly, the only mandate we are receiving from you and U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos is to "open our schools." **Governor, schools in areas with high levels of Covid-19 community spread should not be compelled to reopen against the judgment of local experts. Our schools need your support in this. How can it be safe for those schools to reopen with lower thresholds of safety than we currently have for restaurants or hair salons?**

Educators miss and are concerned for their students. We want to be back in school with students, but we are deeply concerned about the health and safety of students, their families, school staff and communities.

Since early March, NSEA has been working to help educators, students and parents safely navigate the COVID-19 pandemic.

- When the pandemic forced many schools to close, NSEA began offering four hours of educational programming daily for elementary and secondary students – lessons that were

made available free through nearly every video and cable TV service, as well as online – from March 23 to May 15.

- NSEA continues to host Facebook Live sessions providing information and opportunities for our members and the public to ask questions and find answers regarding how to safely provide learning for our students. In fact, several experts and state and local leaders kindly accepted our offer to be featured guests for these events, including Rep. Don Bacon. We were disappointed that you declined our offer to participate.
- We have provided a wealth of COVID-19 resources for members and the public that are available at our website <https://www.nsea.org/COVID19>.
- We have collaborated with other organizations to address the issues created by the pandemic for school staff, students and families.
- On July 1, after consulting with health officials and seeking input from our members and other organizations, NSEA released its [Guidance for a Safe School Reopening](#).
- We've helped hundreds of teachers and education support professionals as they faced difficult personal decisions and concerns caused by the pandemic.
- NSEA has additionally participated in an alliance of medical providers and child and education advocates to develop and release [guidance](#) on returning to school safely, classroom preparedness and stopping the spread of COVID-19.

We will continue to do our part. We are asking that you, as our Governor, do your part.

- Our schools need additional resources to ensure the safety of students and staff.
- Children and teachers need you to strongly support mask requirements when local health or school boards deem them appropriate.
- We need you to provide funding for necessary PPE materials for students and school staff.
- Children, families and school staff need you to ensure free and rapid testing is made available immediately upon discovery of a COVID-19 infection in a classroom.
- We need you to strongly support a school district's decision to suspend contact sports and other extracurricular activities based on risk assessments.
- We need you to base such decisions on recommendations from health experts.

Governor, we believe that the safety and health of students, staff and families is paramount as decisions are made about physically reopening our school buildings. The lives of children, educators – and those of the family members they come home to – are at stake.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jenni Benson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jenni" and last name "Benson" clearly legible.

Jenni Benson
President, NSEA

The Nebraska State Education Association represents 28,000 public school teachers and educational support professionals in Nebraska.