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December 8, 2020

The Honorable Governor Charlie Baker
Massachusetts State House, Room 360
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Governor Baker:

You know as well as anyone how difficult it is to lead through a pandemic. Every day, you undoubtedly hear from outspoken critics who believe the current State restrictions go too far and should be eased or lifted, and you hear from equally outspoken critics who believe the State has not gone far enough and should impose even tougher restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19. For the past nine months, you and your team have had to make incredibly difficult decisions, and you have consistently stated that your actions are always based on the best scientific advice and the latest public health data.

Given your first-hand experience of that enormous leadership challenge, we find it particularly baffling that you do not appear to understand or empathize with the similar circumstances facing the leaders of public school districts throughout Massachusetts.

The members of our two associations – Superintendents and School Committees from across the Commonwealth – have expressed deep disappointment, frustration, and at times outrage at the messaging you have repeatedly delivered in news conferences and in the press, urging school districts to bring more students back to in-person learning. Whenever you issue these blanket statements, many of our members report that they immediately hear from parents, demanding that their students return to school full time, often citing support for their position from the highest elected official in the State.

If only it were that simple. For the past nine months, we have consistently affirmed that we share your belief that children benefit most from in-person learning. No one disputes that remote and hybrid learning pale in comparison to the full experience of students being in school with their teachers and classmates. Throughout the spring and summer, our members worked diligently to devise reopening plans that would bring as many students as possible back into school buildings *within the limitations of the health and safety protocols prescribed by the State*. District leaders, in partnership with families and staff, crafted several plans for a variety of scenarios, and those plans were reviewed and critiqued by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The most challenging requirement – ensuring six feet of social distancing among all children and adults at all times – made it impossible for most schools to return to full in-person learning. As a result, many districts had no option but to begin the school year with hybrid or remote learning models. The conditions that required those decisions in August remain largely the same today. Yet, despite our adherence to the process and guidelines established by your administration, you continue to question why more districts don't simply bring all students back.

What is conspicuously absent from your calls for reopening the schools is any mention of the role teachers' unions have played – and continue to play – in these decisions. In every community across the Commonwealth, reopening plans required the approval of the local teachers' union. School Committees and Superintendents engaged in extensive negotiations with labor leaders to arrive at a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that spelled out, often in painstaking detail, the terms and conditions of each plan. In many cases, districts that were fully prepared to move forward with hybrid models faced such strong resistance from the unions that they had to shift to full remote learning, despite parents' explicit preference for some in-person instruction.

Why then, Governor, when you publicly insist that school districts offer more in-person learning, is that challenge not extended to the teachers' unions, who are often the primary obstacle to that objective?

In fact, the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents asked you in August to provide leadership at the State level to prevent labor unions from stonewalling reopening plans, which you did not support. At any point, you could have convened the leaders of the State's largest teachers' unions to urge their cooperation in providing more in-person teaching and learning, but you have not. Instead, you have relegated that responsibility to local school district leaders – and then disparaged them for not achieving the results you desire. In several communities, union leaders have taken votes of "no confidence" in School Committees and Superintendents over implementation of the reopening plans, but again, these tactics appear to merit no public objection from your office.

Now, more than ever, we need elected officials at all levels of government to deliver a unified message about the complexity of this public health situation and to work together to educate the public about the vast array of variables that must be considered when setting public policy in response to the pandemic. Instead, our members find themselves continuously trying to correct misinformation and educate their constituents about the unique circumstances in each community and the complex set of factors that contributed to the learning model adopted in each district.

As you continue to lead Massachusetts through this ordeal, we respectfully ask that you demonstrate and articulate a more nuanced understanding of the challenges school districts face and the options at our disposal. As always, our members welcome the opportunity to meet with you to collaborate on a statewide strategy to meet the needs of the families and communities we proudly serve.

Sincerely,



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