

September 30, 2020

Virginia Department of Labor and Industry
600 E. Main Street, Suite 207
Richmond, VA 23219



A Union of Professionals

RE: Proposed Permanent Standard: Infectious Disease Prevention: SARS-CoV2 Virus That Causes COVID-19

Dear Mr. Withrow,

On behalf of American Federation of Teachers, Virginia and our thousands of members that work diligently in our public schools to provide quality education to our students, we strongly urge you to make the emergency standard permanent. We appreciate your leadership on this issue and the adoption of the temporary standard to help protect public school staff and students during this challenging crisis. We want to ensure that as Virginia students and staff return to school, they are healthy and safe.

Some schools across Virginia have already started the year 100% in person or with a hybrid model. According to the Virginia Department of Education, 10 school districts are 100% in person and 54 districts are partially in person.¹ This means that currently, 64 of the 132 school districts in Virginia have some component of staff and students in buildings. Across the state, some school staff and families have been in buildings over the summer for laptop distribution and some have already tested positive or been exposed to COVID-19 while in schools and we expect these numbers to increase as educators return to in person classes. The permanent standard is necessary to protect our school community as we return to in person learning.

We all want to return to school, but we must return to school safely with proper science-based safeguards in place for our school staff, students and families. COVID-19 is a difficult situation that everyone is navigating and it is critical that school districts have one clear, consistent standard in place that protects all school staff from our teachers to our custodians to our bus drivers to food service workers and instructional support staff. Every single staff member and student in Virginia deserves to be protected from COVID-19 at work. Standards at each school should not change due to federal inaction or political pressure.

As schools across the country begin to reopen, we unfortunately have seen what happens when strong health and safety measures such as physical distancing, proper PPE, training, and reporting of infections are not in place. The science is clear. Schools are high risk settings for spread of COVID-19. The temporary standard will help decrease the spread of COVID-19 in our schools and we must make it permanent to limit community transmission. Each workplace and school district is different across Virginia and this standard is important because each workplace will be able to implement a tailored program of control practices that will help keep everyone safe. This is particularly important for staff in our schools who, by the nature of their job cannot be 6 feet from their students (for example those who work with students that have certain disabilities, speech pathologists, etc), or their students cannot wear face-coverings in the classroom. Having a permanent standard that establishes strong health and safety practices will help isolate and control the spread of COVID-19.

The temporary standard was the first step we needed to help make our schools safer – now we need to make sure it is permanent because COVID-19 is not going away anytime soon. We need a strong, comprehensive, and enforceable standard with no loopholes for employers that outlines clear requirements based on sound science and proven successful practices. We urge the Virginia Department of Labor and Industry to move forward with the permanent standard rulemaking right away to protect

teachers, support staff, students, and our families. Our schools are open now and our school community needs these protections permanently.

Sincerely,

Thomas Calhoun
President
Norfolk Federation of Teachers

Jeion Ward
President
Hampton Federation of Teachers

Tina Williams
President
Fairfax County Federation of Teachers

ⁱ Virginia Department of Education. (2020). *State Snapshot: How Virginia Schools Are Reopening*.
http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/health_medical/office/reopen-status.shtml