

Education Minnesota

Survey: Education Minnesota members favor distance learning in the fall

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ST. PAUL, Minnesota. July 23, 2020 - A new survey of the members of Education Minnesota found distance learning was the most popular choice for delivering education through public schools in the fall and that educators were extremely concerned about the safety of students and themselves during the pandemic.

Forty-nine percent of the respondents said they preferred distance learning while 29 percent preferred hybrid classes and 17 percent favored a return to in-person classes. The survey was open to the 86,000 members of the union from July 16-20. The number of educators to respond was 20,524.

- [Read the survey](#)

“Learning safely is the goal,” said Denise Specht, president of Education Minnesota, at a news conference Thursday. “It should be done in-person when we can, and at a distance when we must. What is safe must be defined by the latest data, the best scientific analysis and with an eye on the racial disparities that haunt our society. We cannot be bullied by an arbitrary start date on the calendar nor can we settle for ‘safe enough’ because that’s all that’s in the district budget.”

Specht said the survey found 59 percent of educators said they were uncomfortable returning to in-person education even if their schools met all safety standards, such as those published by the federal Centers of Disease Control and Prevention.

“Educators are anxious about their own health and the health of the people they love,” Specht said. “And it’s clear the racial inequalities that run through education are present in this decision, too, with educators of color even more reluctant to return to in-person learning because of the extra risk the virus poses to Black, brown and Indigenous communities.”

Sizi Goyah, a teacher at Brooklyn Center High School, noted that educators of color preferred distance learning at a higher rate than their white peers and only 13 percent of educators of color preferred to reopen building in the fall.

“This is not surprising. A long history of racist policies in health care, housing, and other fields have put Black, brown and Indigenous people at higher risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19,” he said. “This pandemic did not create these disparities; it magnified them.”

Other educators spoke Thursday about the challenges to reopening school buildings safely. Steve Miltich, a custodian in the Osseo schools and SEIU Local 284 member, said it would be impossible to disinfect school buildings to the new COVID-19 standards without additional custodian staff and major changes to the school-day schedule to create times to clean between classes.

Tiffany Dittrich, a veteran language arts teacher in White Bear Lake, said the guidelines that say students should stay six feet away from each other were unworkable with the current square footage of school classrooms.

“If you think about your last visit to a classroom, you’ll realize the near impossibility of meeting that measure, given the limited space available in our schools,” she said. “One thing’s for sure: I don’t know of any classroom in White Bear Lake that could fit this configuration.”

There were also concerns about the risks to educators who can’t afford health insurance. “(Education support professionals) worry about how they will afford health care if they or their family members become ill with the COVID virus,” said Jeanne Fox, an education support professional in the Osseo Area School District. “This could devastate many families.”

Katie Dohman, a freelance writer and parent of three children under the age of eight, said she really wanted her kids back in school in District 197, but she doesn’t see a plan for how to do it safely or even how to get schools the resources they need. And she said it wasn’t fair to educators to reopen buildings with so many unanswered questions.

“When we know doctors and nurses still haven’t gotten the PPE they need, how will we get proper equipment for our educators?” Dohman asked at the news conference. “When educators have already been paying out of their own pockets for school supplies, will we help them cover costs of masks, hand sanitizer, and other safety equipment? Most importantly, why do we keep asking and expecting educators to put their bodies on the line?”

Following the news conference Thursday, educators in nearly 200 vehicles drove through the state Capitol complex calling on Gov. Tim Walz to remember the health and safety of educators and students when the governor decides how schools will open in the fall.

About Education Minnesota

Education Minnesota is the voice for professional educators and students. Education Minnesota’s members include teachers and education support professionals in Minnesota’s public school districts, faculty members at Minnesota’s community and technical colleges and University of Minnesota campuses in Duluth and Crookston, retired educators and student teachers. Education Minnesota is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association and AFL-CIO.

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