



Biden's push to reopen schools could spur confrontation with teachers' unions

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President Joe Biden's commitment to reopen schools has quickly emerged as one of the most challenging and politically precarious promises of his early days in office, and new federal guidance might not go far enough to assuage weary parents or Republican critics.

"We have sacrificed so much in the last year," Biden said Friday as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released updated guidelines for schools. "But science tells us that if we support our children, educators, and communities with the resources they need, we can get kids back to school safely in more parts of the country sooner."

CDC Director's five steps to get back to school

The drive to open schools for in-person learning amid the coronavirus pandemic has cast many Democratic governors and mayors against teachers' unions that have traditionally been among their most powerful and loyal allies. In liberal strongholds like Chicago, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., city officials have threatened or taken legal action to prevent teachers from striking over demands that they return to work before they believe it is safe.

The White House now finds itself in the center of that fight, and choosing sides could become increasingly hazardous for Biden as tensions rise. During a pre-Super Bowl interview last week, the president said school closures due to the coronavirus constitute a "national emergency."

"I think it's time for schools to reopen safely," Biden told CBS anchor Norah O'Donnell. "Safely. Teachers want to go back. My wife's a teacher. They want to go back to school."

Before taking office, Biden committed to getting most K-8 schools open within his first 100 days, but he was somewhat vague about what would qualify as "open." White House press secretary Jen Psaki drew public backlash last week for suggesting schools would only need to be open one day a week to declare victory.

Authoritative data on school openings are scarce, but surveys of parents and administrators suggest most schools were already open at least once a week by January. Some of the nation's largest school districts remained mostly or completely virtual, though.

Psaki seemingly revised the target at a press briefing later in the week, stating President Biden would not rest until all schools were open every day. She acknowledged parents would not consider having their children's schools open one day a week sufficient progress.

"I can assure any parent listening that his objective, his commitment is to ensuring schools are open five days a week," Psaki said. "That's what he wants to achieve, and we are going to lead with science and the advice that they are giving us."

CDC RECOMMENDS 5 KEY STRATEGIES TO REOPEN SCHOOLS (930pET)

The CDC released its formal guidance the following day, outlining five key mitigation strategies schools should implement to open safely: masks, physical distancing, handwashing, cleaning, and rapid and efficient contact-tracing. Screening testing, improved ventilation, and vaccination of teachers and staff are also recommended where possible.

"CDC is not mandating that schools reopen," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said Friday. "These recommendations simply provide schools a long-needed roadmap for how to do so safely under different levels of disease in the community."

Teachers' unions and school administrators welcomed the new guidance, but they argued too many of the nation's schools are ill-equipped to adhere to the recommendations. It is uncertain how much the CDC input will impact reopening debates around the country.

"Educators have been failed by too many politicians who have defied common sense, ignored health and science, and divided communities," Becky Pringle, president of the National Education Association, said in a statement. "Now, with a partner in the White House, we have the opportunity to do this right, to do it safely, and to do it as quickly as resources allow."

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, noted that the guidance advises communities to prioritize vaccinating teachers and to make accommodations for educators who have preexisting conditions or are caring for someone at risk. She also cautioned the spread of highly transmissible variants of the coronavirus could complicate reopening timelines.

"We urge the CDC to remain flexible as more data comes to light," Weingarten said. "The guidance is instructive for this moment in time, but this disease is not static."

Public health experts have raised concerns that some aspects of the CDC guidance might be more stringent than scientific evidence dictates. If school districts insist on rigidly following the recommendations and remain on hybrid schedules until community transmission is low, students still would not be in classrooms five days a week next fall.

Dr. Jeffrey Singer, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, told The National Desk it is significant the CDC guidance does not require teacher vaccination, which some unions have demanded and would have stalled reopenings. Still, he added the standards on community spread levels and maintaining 6 feet of distance between students presents considerable hurdles.

"I worry that this emphasis on 6 feet also might lead to a delay in schools opening and we could wind up having to miss another school year in many areas of this country," Singer said Monday.

According to CNN, 89% of the nation's children live in counties that would be considered "red zones" for COVID-19 transmission under the new CDC standards. The CDC states schools in

such areas can safely open if mitigation strategies are strictly followed, including routine screening testing.

After Biden set high expectations, Republicans have already begun heaping blame on the White House for failing to fight aggressively to get schools open. If classrooms stay closed, they see a prime opportunity to win back some of the suburban swing voters who fled the party over the last four years.

“A lot of the suburban women voters who were turned off by Donald Trump’s style are twice as angry at Joe Biden for not recognizing science and opening the schools five days per week,” said Republican strategist Mark Weaver.

Schools in many Republican-run cities and states have been open for months, and teachers’ unions tend to have more influence in urban areas. That means key Democratic constituencies like Black and Latino households are the ones most directly affected by schools staying shuttered, and the competing interests of parents and teachers could pose political challenges for the White House.

“The party’s urban base is divided on this issue... It’s going to be messy,” said Daniel DiSalvo, an expert on unions and politics at the City College of New York and a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.

Democrats often accused President Donald Trump of disregarding science in his pandemic response, but Republicans argue unions and their allies are now the ones ignoring the evidence for partisan purposes. Researchers in Wisconsin and North Carolina found schools with mask requirements and social distancing protocols have been operating safely since the fall, and virus transmission among students and staff was often lower than in the surrounding communities.

“The science says that the schools should open, but instead of listening to the science, the Biden administration is caving in to Democrat special interest groups,” Republican National Committee Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel told Politico.

Former Education Secretary Bill Bennet said Monday it is a “scandal” that schools remain closed in many communities, and a “catastrophe” for children that some will not return to classrooms in the fall. However, he also questioned whether President Biden has the political clout to do anything about it.

"If Joe Biden calls up the head of the teachers’ union and says, 'I want you to do this,' you know what they’ll say, 'we’ll think about it,'" Bennett said on Fox News.

As President Trump discovered last fall, the federal government’s options for forcing schools to reopen are fairly limited. Democrats in Congress are unlikely to support tethering federal funds to in-person learning, and despite the rhetoric in Washington, these are ultimately state and local decisions.

“There are not many policy levers the Biden administration has to pull that are going to get them back to the classroom,” DiSalvo said.

The president can apply political pressure, and the public might prove more receptive to that than it was when the school year began. Parents are more frustrated, children are experiencing graver

consequences of remote learning, and research and experience have demonstrated the risk of transmission in schools is relatively low.

Last summer and fall, polls showed the public broadly opposed rushing to reopen schools, and many parents were reluctant to send their children back even if they could. Recent surveys suggest more comfort with returning to classrooms and growing anger at school boards and politicians who want to stay virtual.

The White House has acknowledged those sentiments, but it has so far sided with educators who say they lack the resources to comply with public health guidance and CDC recommendations. Administration officials have linked successful school reopenings to the passage of the president's \$1.9 trillion relief package.

Biden's American Rescue Plan proposal includes \$130 billion for K-12 schools, on top of more than \$50 billion already appropriated. The funds are intended to get schools open and mitigate learning loss for the rest of this school year and next year.

"These needs cost money," Biden said Friday. "But the cost of keeping our children, families, and educators safe is nothing when compared with the cost of inaction."

Critics say much of the money previously allocated for schools has not yet been spent, and the \$130 billion request far exceeds the CDC's estimates for the cost of implementing mitigation protocols. The White House maintains a recent CDC study that calculated the cost of reopening public schools to be approximately \$23 billion was not intended to be exhaustive, and additional funds are required.

"While the Biden administration's own scientists say schools could reopen safely now with smart and simple precautions, their proposal buys into the myth from big labor that schools should stay shut a lot longer," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said last week.

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., told colleagues Tuesday he expects final passage of the relief package by mid-March. Once Congress has approved nearly \$200 billion to ensure schools can open safely, keeping classrooms closed into the spring or fall could spur even greater outrage and put the White House in an untenable position.

"This will be a powerful reminder of how beholden Joe Biden is to the teachers' unions," Weaver said.

(If you are viewing on a mobile app, [click here](#) to take the poll.)

Republicans have struggled to make inroads on education in the past, though, and it is unclear how much blame President Biden will shoulder in the eyes of voters over local disputes between unions and school boards. It is also possible more schools will open their doors in the weeks and months ahead as vaccination accelerates and governors, mayors, and the White House press to get teachers and students back into classrooms safely.

"You can see how Republicans would see this as a wedge issue," DiSalvo said. "Whether they can capitalize on it is another matter."