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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

NYSUT, AFT demand school districts follow state Department of Health guidance for reopening

ALBANY, N.Y., July 19, 2020 — New York State United Teachers and the American Federation of Teachers today demanded that school districts follow school reopening guidance issued by the governor and state Department of Health that mandates social distancing, reduced occupancy and the use of masks, among other safety measures.

The unions made the call amid reports of confusion over such requirements at the local level as districts develop their individual reopening plans.

“With the clock ticking for districts to develop and submit reopening plans, there is no time for ambiguity,” NYSUT President Andy Pallotta said. “We’ll say it again: Health and safety, as well as equity, are absolutely essential in planning for the fall. The Department of Health issued clear guidelines regarding social distancing and masks. There’s no reason districts should be guessing at what the safest option for students, staff and the entire school community is.”

“Frankly I was shocked when I saw an interpretation of the minimum guidance on safely reopening schools that suggested that a district could choose masks or physical distancing. Working with fellow members of the governor’s Reimagine Education Advisory Council, we developed strong guidelines for how to keep our schools safe, if districts moved forward with some form of in-person instruction. And that guidance was spelled out in Governor Cuomo’s reopening schools safely plan. It’s not an either/or; physical distancing or physical barriers are absolutely necessary in schools, as are masks. Masks are strongly recommended at all times, and absolutely are required if it is impossible to physically distance, as in hall passing,” AFT President Randi Weingarten said. “Parents need to feel confident that if they send their children back to school it is safe, just as educators need to feel equally as confident that it will be safe for them. We can’t have confusion at this stage. Districts need to get this right.”

According to the DOH guidance:

- Districts must ensure there is proper social distancing on school grounds and in school facilities. “Specifically, appropriate social distancing means six feet of space in all directions between individuals

or use of appropriate physical barriers between individuals that do not adversely affect air flow, heating, cooling, or ventilation, or otherwise present a health or safety risk.”

- Even with face coverings in use, occupancy of spaces, such as classrooms and other small spaces, “should not exceed 50% of the maximum capacity of the space, unless it is designed for use by a single occupant.”
- Face coverings must be worn “any time or place that individuals cannot maintain appropriate social distancing.” Further, face coverings are “strongly recommended at all times, except for meals and instruction with appropriate social distancing. However, Responsible Parties can require face coverings at all times, even during instruction; and it is strongly recommended in areas with higher rates of COVID-19 community infection.”
- Other health and safety measures must also be in place.

NYSUT and AFT believe that **all** of these requirements must be met and are unequivocally necessary before anyone returns to the classroom.

“We must get this right,” Pallotta said. “We will not jeopardize the health and safety of students, educators and families by agreeing it’s safe to go back without these requirements in place.”

New York State United Teachers is a statewide union with more than 600,000 members in education, human services and health care. NYSUT is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and the AFL-CIO.