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September 18, 2020

Utah State Board of Education
250 East 500 South
Salt Lake City, UT 84111

Dear Chair Huntsman and members of the Board:

On behalf of Utah educators, the Utah Education Association calls on you to increase state oversight and compliance measures to protect the health and safety of public school students, educators and school staff.

As Governor Herbert rightly stated in his Sept 17 press briefing, the recent spike in COVID-19 cases is a “red flag warning.” It is concerning that such outcomes were predictable given the lack of consistent and enforceable health mandates for Utah public schools.

According to the Utah Department of Health COVID-19 School Manual, a “school outbreak” occurs when “15 people test positive for COVID-19 across multiple settings in the school” (p. 95). The manual identifies the following recommendations to protect students, teachers and employees at the school:

- The people who tested positive should isolate until they have been fever-free for 24 hours and it has been at least 10 days since they first got sick or tested positive
- The people who were exposed should quarantine for 14 days
- No student can go to school for 14 days from the last date of exposure
- They should clean the whole school using the cleaning guidelines

In many cases, teachers reported to work believing these guidelines would be followed. And yet, at least four high schools have now exceeded this threshold of exposure and their school district boards are electing to ignore these recommendations. The UEA’s concern is that a recommendation can be disregarded despite the negative impacts on the health and safety of staff and students.

On July 31, the UEA issued Five Key Requirements for a Safe Return to In-person Learning. These requirements were shared with the Governor on August 5, with the State Board of Education on August 6 and with the Education Interim Committee on August 19. However, the continued lack of state-level accountability and oversight for the implementation of district safety plans remains a serious concern.

The State Board of Education must establish stronger requirements for local boards of education. Utah code empowers local health departments to take an active role in school outbreaks. Specifically, 26A-

1-114 (3) states “the local health department has the following duties regarding public and private schools within its boundaries: (a) enforce all ordinances, standards, and regulations pertaining to the public health of persons attending public and private schools.” The State Board of Education, working together with the governor and the State Department of Health, must protect educators, staff and students by taking stronger action to establish clear health requirements for local boards of education. School districts can then work with local health departments to implement these requirements.

Teachers and other school staff play critical roles in public education and they need your support. We are hearing from many teachers who say they feel helpless, disrespected and unsafe. We call on members of the State Board of Education to protect students, educators and school staff by establishing clear and enforceable requirements based on guidance from health professionals.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Heidi Matthews".

Heidi Matthews, M.Ed.
President, Utah Education Association

cc: Sydnee Dickson, State Superintendent of Public Instruction
Renee Pinkney, UEA Vice President
Dr. Brad Bartels, UEA Executive Director
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