

Teacher Union Resistance to Reopening Schools:

An Examination of the Largest U.S. School Districts

By Mike Antonucci



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“We’ve been trying to reopen schools since last April.”

– Randi Weingarten,
President, American Federation of Teachers
March 19, 2021

Introduction

Since the COVID-19 outbreak that led to the closure of most of America’s public schools in March 2020, there have been numerous efforts to reopen schools for in-person instruction. Although successful in some places, every reopening attempt had to confront the power and influence of public-school employees, usually expressed through their labor unions.

Unions were naturally concerned with the health and safety of their members, but the conditions they set on a return to the classroom seemed to many observers to be excessive and opportunistic.

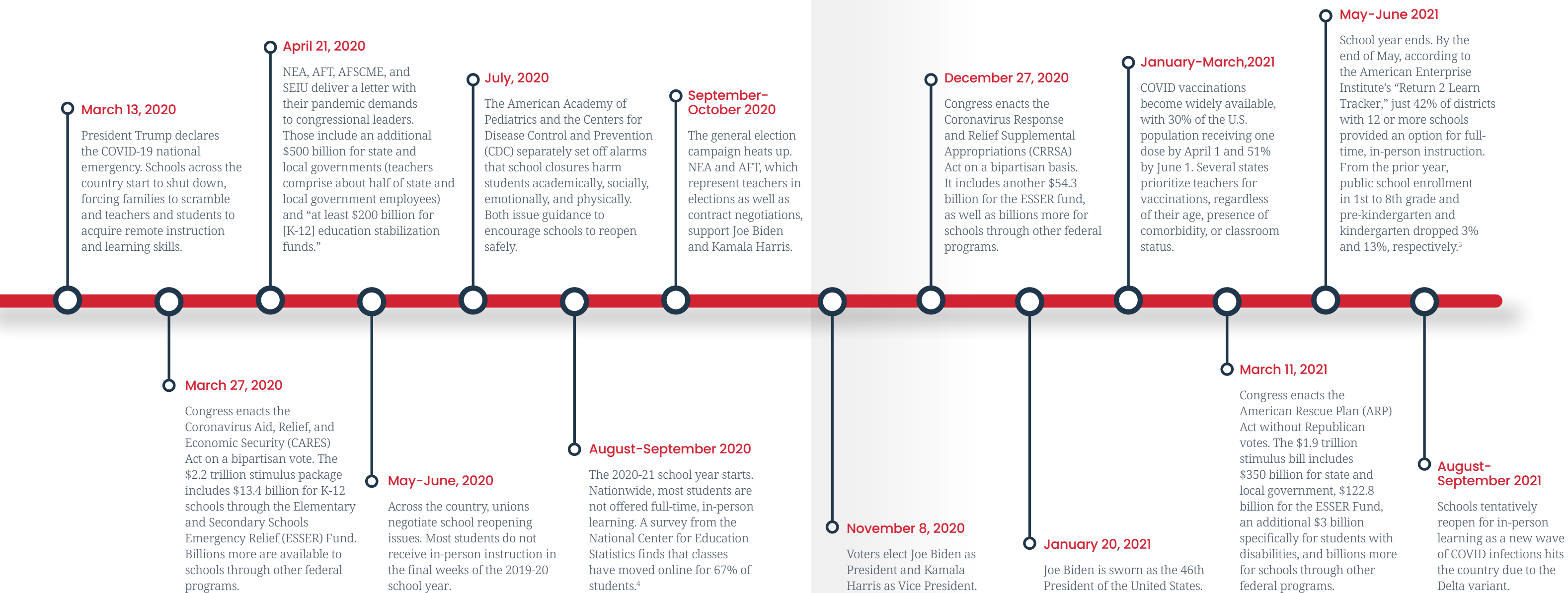
Union officers took to the airwaves to denounce this perception as unfair. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), raised some eyebrows on March 19, 2021, during an interview on the Black News Channel.¹ When Weingarten said AFT had been “trying to reopen schools since last April,” the average American could be forgiven for wondering what she was talking about.

Her claim referred to the AFT’s public release of its report, *A Plan to Safely Reopen America’s Schools and Communities*, on April 29, 2020 — a mere six weeks after public schools began closing in response to the COVID-19 outbreak.²

Before publishing that report, AFT, along with the other major government employee unions—the National Education Association (NEA), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)—signed a letter to Congress dated April 21, 2020, that outlined their reopening wish list.³

Teacher union officers across the country repeatedly professed that they wanted U.S. public schools to reopen more than anyone. This report documents their positions and actions on school reopenings in seven large school districts from the first closings in March 2020 to the start of the 2021-22 school year.

National School Reopening Timeline



The national teacher unions, their state affiliates, and their locals have each issued various recommendations, requirements, and demands before their members would agree to return to the classroom. This report examines these issues, with a particular focus on seven of the country's 11 largest K-12 public school districts and their associated teacher unions. They are (in order of enrollment size):

- 1) New York City and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT)
- 2) Los Angeles Unified School District and United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA)
- 3) Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU)
- 4) Miami-Dade County Public Schools and the United Teachers of Dade (UTD)
- 5) Clark County (Nevada) Public School and the Clark County Education Association (CCEA)
- 6) Houston Independent School District and the Houston Federation of Teachers (HFT)
- 7) The Fairfax County (Virginia) Public Schools, the Fairfax Education Association (FEA), and the Fairfax County Federation of Teachers (FCFT)

To ensure geographic diversity, this report includes the Miami-Dade school system but excludes four other Florida school districts that rank in the top 11 in terms of student enrollment: Broward, Hillsborough, Orange, and Palm Beach counties.

The choice of school districts and unions is not based solely on size. The unions vary in philosophy and environment, which greatly influenced how they reacted to the COVID outbreak and how much of their agenda they were able to accomplish.

This report examines two questions: whether the teacher unions in these seven school systems have actually supported and worked to reopen schools since the initial closures in March 2020; and whether their recommendations concerning reopening policy were vital necessities for the health and well-being of students and employees or simply a wish list of desirable policy and funding outcomes unrelated to the virus.

The answers to these questions are crucial, as a generation of American students will pay the price for the extensive, degraded educational experience brought on by the pandemic. They will pay not only in lost learning and opportunities but also in actual dollars for the deficit spending fueling a multitude of recovery plans, mitigation efforts, and new programs.

The National Plans

Although there was broad public agreement on several mitigation measures the unions requested, including making masks and other personal protective equipment available to employees, physical distancing, and quarantining procedures, national teacher union recommendations for reopening schools went well beyond these safety measures.

The AFT plan noted that “COVID-19 has exacerbated the deep inequalities in our society and underscored the need for additional public investments to combat this inequity.” This combat required a lot of ammunition:

- Smaller class sizes (AFT recommended 12 to 15 students per class)
- Additional staff with expertise in mental health to provide trauma and sensitivity training for all staff, students, and parents
- A limit on student testing
- A suspension of teacher performance evaluations
- At least \$750 billion in federal aid to state and local governments

“It is not the time to be concerned about deficits,” AFT stated. “And the federal government should be prepared to raise taxes.”

The April 21, 2020, letter from the four major public employee unions to Congress had similar demands for “bold investment at the federal level”:

- At least \$1 trillion in state stabilization funds
- At least \$200 billion in public education stabilization funds
- Increased Medicaid funds
- Inpatient cost-sharing and co-payments for COVID-19 treatment
- COBRA premium relief for federal, state, and local public employees
- Paid sick leave for all workers

“We can’t simply return to the way things were before the pandemic hit, just as the New Deal wasn’t about simply getting back to life before the 1929 stock market crash,” the letter read.

Congress enacted the American Rescue Plan on March 11, 2021, and the NEA and AFT still did not push for schools to reopen.

The unions had to wait almost a year, but after the swearing-in of a new Congress and President, they saw many of their demands enacted into law, including at least another \$130 billion for K-12 schools, on top of the \$70 billion received under the CARES and CRSSA Acts. Congress enacted the American Rescue Plan on March 11, 2021, and the NEA and AFT still did not push for schools to reopen.



State Affiliate Strategy

State affiliates may follow the lead of the NEA and AFT, but they also tailor their approaches to the realities of their individual states. Surveying them is well beyond the scope of this report, but the approach taken by one, the California Teachers Association (CTA), is worth a closer examination. More than one out of every ten NEA members belongs to CTA.

Just a few weeks after the governor of California closed schools and locked down businesses in March 2020, CTA issued a “bargaining advisory”⁶ to its 981 local affiliates. It explained in detail what tactics to use in negotiations with school districts about reopening.

Some of CTA’s recommendations were defensive in nature. Any concessions should be temporary, with a sunset date, and made as a side-agreement, not included in the contract itself. The union also advised that districts “may attempt to implement [budget] cuts as soon as possible, before all the facts are known.”

CTA also saw the crisis as an opportunity, particularly as a means to expand the scope of collective bargaining.

“During the pandemic, district decisions and/or planned actions that would otherwise be considered outside the mandatory scope of bargaining may be within reach because of their impact on safety,” the advisory stated. CTA then listed a number of reopening proposals—staggered start times and school years, limiting the number of students on campus, distance learning, and more—and explained how each item was a mandatory subject for bargaining.

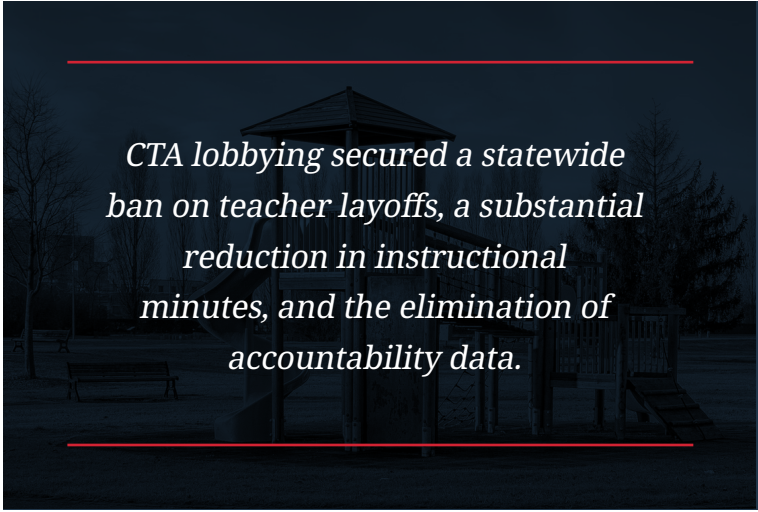
Even if a district decided to do nothing, that inaction should be a mandatory subject of bargaining, according to CTA.

“Even a district that decides to do nothing will invoke safety concerns that the chapter can and should bargain over, such as providing necessary Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) if the district has no plan to do so,” read the advisory.

CTA told its locals to “ensure they have proposals to get something in exchange for concessions.”

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“When exercising a ‘get for the give’ approach to bargaining concessions, locals should consider strengthening or implementing consultation procedures language in the [collective bargaining agreement],” CTA advised. “Now is the time to secure [contract] language improvements that we have wanted for some time.”



CTA lobbying secured a statewide ban on teacher layoffs, a substantial reduction in instructional minutes, and the elimination of accountability data.

CTA also lobbied the state legislature and the governor for multiple protections in the 2020 state budget.⁷ The union was successful in winning a ban on teacher layoffs, a substantial reduction in required instructional minutes, and the elimination of public accountability data collections for 2020, including those for academics, absenteeism, graduation and suspension rates, and college readiness.

Local Union Actions

The national and state unions have a great deal of influence over their local affiliates, but they do not control them. Although AFT President Weingarten may support a policy, her ability to turn that support into action in Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, or elsewhere is limited. The local unions are very powerful in their cities and regions. If they wanted schools opened, it would be difficult—if not impossible—to deny them their wish.

New York City and the United Federation of Teachers

When Governor Andrew Cuomo shuttered schools in May 2020 for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year, UFT released a statement supporting his decision.⁸

Through the summer, there was no real movement on reopening NYC schools for the 2020-2021 school year. UFT’s public statements were pessimistic. In August 2020, the union asked, “Will any parents be willing to put their children in a school whose principal believes the building is not ready to open because it is not safe?”⁹

At the end of that month, the UFT executive board prepared a strike authorization vote if a satisfactory reopening deal was not reached with New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio.¹⁰ Both parties soon settled, and the agreement led to a partial reopening. Pre-K and students with special needs would return on September 21, 2020, other elementary students by September 29, and middle and high school students by October 1.

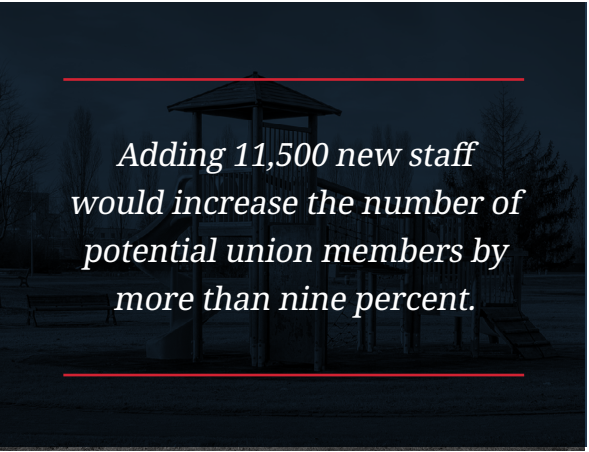
This was sooner than most other large school districts, but it was a half-measure. Students were in classrooms only two or three days a week and attended remote classes on the other days. Fewer than one-third of the city’s public-school students returned to school.¹¹

Under the agreement reached between the mayor and UFT, if the seven-day average COVID positivity test rate in the city reached three percent, in-person school was to be suspended. This occurred when the district shut down all schools on November 19, even though the positivity rate among students and teachers was less than 0.2 percent.

Reopening did not resume until December 7, 2020, for pre-K through grade 3; February 25, 2021, for middle schools; and March 22, 2021, for high schools.

United Federation of Teachers released a series of recommendations for post-pandemic schooling, including spending more than \$1 billion to address learning loss caused by the very school closures that the union demanded.

UFT touted their negotiated protocols as being responsible for schools being “the safest public spaces in New York City.”¹² Though in-person learning had not returned for a majority of students, United Federation of Teachers released a series of recommendations for post-pandemic schooling, including spending more than \$1 billion to address learning loss caused by the very school closures that the union demanded.¹³



Adding 11,500 new staff would increase the number of potential union members by more than nine percent.

UFT asked for teams of academic intervention specialists, social workers, and psychologists for each of the city’s 1,800 public schools. For the average New York City public school, UFT demanded three to four teams, a total of six to eight professionals, or roughly one team for every 200 students, according to the union.

The union estimated it would cost \$1 billion to hire the estimated 10,000 new employees needed for this new program. Additionally, the union wanted smaller class sizes in 100 of the neediest schools, requiring the hiring of 1,500 or more teachers, at a cost of \$150 million annually (or about \$100,000 each).

UFT did not provide any information on how to measure the effectiveness of adding 11,500 more school employees; however, this hiring would increase the number of potential union members by more than nine percent.

Mayor de Blasio announced in May 2021 that all students would return to five-day-a-week in-person school, with no remote option. He added in July that all school district employees would be required to be fully vaccinated (or tested weekly) and masked on campus.

UFT was generally supportive but still had some qualifications. “This approach puts the emphasis on vaccination but still allows for personal choice and provides additional safeguards through regular testing,” a press statement read.¹⁴ “There are still many things to do before we are prepared to safely open our schools in September [2021].”

From the time UFT released that statement until September 2021, the number of COVID cases in New York City had doubled and was higher than in November 2020 when schools were shut down.

Amid its qualms, UFT reached an agreement to reopen schools for some students before most other big city teacher unions did so. Still, it was only a relative success, as hundreds of thousands of New York City students remained in remote schooling. By January 2021, more than 2,000 students had disappeared from the school system.¹⁵

All New York City public schools reopened for classroom instruction on September 13, 2021.

Los Angeles Unified School District and United Teachers Los Angeles

UTLA leaders pride themselves on being proponents of “social justice unionism.” They believe that the power of their labor union should be used not only to improve the wages, benefits, and working conditions of their members but also to move public policy to the left.

This philosophy was in evidence soon after Los Angeles schools were shuttered. In July 2020, UTLA released a 17-page report listing the union’s recommendations for restarting in-person schooling.¹⁶ It received national media attention due to how far afield it roamed from education policy.

“The COVID-19 pandemic in the United States underscores the deep equity and justice challenges arising from our profoundly racist, intensely unequal society,” it read. “Unlike other countries that recognize protecting lives is the key to protecting livelihoods, the United States has chosen to prioritize profits over people.”

UTLA’s requirements for restarting school included core progressive policies:

- Testing of 100% of symptomatic individuals in the community
- Decreasing or stable infection and hospitalization rates in Los Angeles County for 14 days and an absolute case number that indicates community spread has stopped
- Paid sick leave for parents with symptomatic children at home

- Class sizes of no more than 12 students
- A nurse in every school
- No standardized tests
- At least \$500 billion in federal support
- Medicare for All
- Passage of the union-backed Schools and Local Communities Funding Act (California voters rejected this proposal in November 2020)
- A wealth tax
- A millionaire tax
- Defunding the police
- A charter school moratorium

“As it stands, the only people guaranteed to benefit from the premature physical reopening of schools amidst a rapidly accelerating pandemic are billionaires and the politicians they’ve purchased,” the UTLA report concluded.

It is thus not surprising that the Los Angeles Unified School District made no progress to reopen schools in 2020 and very little in early 2021. Once vaccines became available, Governor Gavin Newsom announced a statewide reopening plan in March 2021. It received the support of UTLA’s state parent union, the CTA.¹⁷

UTLA was not moved. President Cecily Myart-Cruz called the plan “a recipe for propagating structural racism.”¹⁸

On March 10, 2021, however, the union announced it had reached a tentative agreement¹⁹ with the district on reopening for the remainder of the 2020-21 school year. The provisions dealt with safety and health protocols and procedures. There was no mention of class size, nurse staffing, standardized tests, charter schools, or most of the other items on UTLA’s list.

UTLA’s president blamed “reactionary forces” for being responsible for the move to reopen schools.

Despite this, UTLA congratulated itself on its victory. “Union-negotiated safety protocols have kept their students and families safe,” Myart-Cruz told members in a May 28, 2021, video update.²⁰ UTLA’s president blamed “reactionary forces” for being responsible for the move to reopen schools.

Myart-Cruz then turned her attention to the new funding flowing into the district from state and federal sources. The union’s top priority would be to lower class size. “The most powerful way we can impact students is to have more caring adults on campus,” she said.

Next would be salary increases. She informed members, “rallies and news conferences are in the works” in support of them.

In June 2021, the union reached agreement with the LAUSD on guidelines for the 2021-22 school year. There were only minor changes to the previous agreement. With COVID procedures apparently settled, the union could return to lobbying for more school employees earning more money.

In contract negotiations,²¹ UTLA asked for a six percent pay increase and a three percent bonus, plus a \$2,000 technology stipend. The union also demanded a student vaccine mandate and for an entire classroom to quarantine from pre-K to grade 6 due to a single positive COVID-19 case. It quickly walked those ideas back after a public uproar.²²

They also demanded that, for the 2021-22 school year, the district not evaluate permanent UTLA members and forgo any student standardized tests not required by state or federal law.

What this will mean for the students of Los Angeles is unknown, but Myart-Cruz seems unperturbed.

*“Our kids didn’t lose anything. It’s OK that our babies may not have learned all their times tables. They learned resilience. They learned survival. They learned critical-thinking skills. They know the difference between a riot and a protest. They know the words *insurrection* and *coup*.”*

UTLA president Cecily Myart-Cruz

“There is no such thing as learning loss,” she said recently.²³ “Our kids didn’t lose anything. It’s OK that our babies may not have learned all their times tables. They learned resilience. They learned survival. They learned critical-thinking skills. They know the difference between a riot and a protest. They know the words *insurrection* and *coup*.”

LAUSD schools reopened on August 17, 2021.

Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Teachers Union

In December 2020, the Chicago Teachers Union tweeted, “The push to reopen schools is rooted in sexism, racism and misogyny.”

The leaders of the CTU share a progressive ideology with those of UTLA. Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot made no headway in negotiations to reopen the city’s schools during 2020. In December 2020, the Chicago Teachers Union tweeted, “The push to reopen schools is rooted in sexism, racism and misogyny.”

Public outrage soon followed, and CTU deleted the tweet.²⁴

As in Los Angeles, the post-election availability of vaccines seems to have had a positive effect on bargaining. By February 2021, the city and the union had reached an agreement. Unlike UTLA, the Chicago union did not tout its achievement. On the contrary, union leaders went out of their way to criticize it.²⁵

“Let me be clear. This plan is not what any of us deserve. Not us. Not our students. Not their families,” said CTU President Jesse Sharkey.

When the city developed a follow-on plan to reopen high schools, CTU again balked and asked for a delay, claiming “national health experts are raising concerns about the push to reopen schools, bars and other businesses as new variants drive a spike in cases.”²⁶

CTU had its own list of demands for COVID relief funding, which included more staff and resources for bilingual, homeless, and special needs students. The union demanded a nurse and librarian in every school, an additional 500 social workers and counselors, and more restorative justice coordinators. CTU also recommended “ending any non-required standardized assessment.”²⁷

Class size reduction was also high on its priority list, although the city’s schools have been bleeding enrollment for two decades, losing another 15,000 students during the pandemic.²⁸

In July 2021, the CDC issued guidance for K-12 schools.²⁹ The guidance included language “on the importance of offering in-person learning, regardless of whether all of the prevention strategies can be implemented at the school.” CTU immediately responded that the guidance “triggers more questions than answers.”³⁰

In August 2021, two weeks before all Chicago schools were scheduled to reopen for the 2021-22 school year, CTU claimed Mayor Lightfoot “continues to stall on agreeing to even the minimum safety standards landed last spring.”³¹

The school district saw things differently. “It is disappointing that the CTU is rejecting science for their own gain and continues to second guess health experts and express their own unscientific opinions about health-related matters,” said a statement from Chicago Public Schools spokesman James Gherardi.³² “The CTU appears to be committed to spreading doubt instead of preparing for the upcoming school year after the past year’s immense disruption to learning.”

Chicago Public Schools reopened for classroom instruction in stages during August 2021.

Miami-Dade County Public Schools and the United Teachers of Dade

Unlike New York, California, and Illinois, the political environment in Florida is not as friendly to teacher union interests. This limited what UTD was able to achieve, but its tactics and recommendations were very similar to other unions.

In July 2020, UTD joined its state union, the Florida Education Association, in suing the state to prevent the “reckless and unsafe reopening of schools” in the fall of 2020.³³ The union dropped the lawsuit that December.³⁴

Most K-12 schools in Florida reopened for in-person instruction in August of 2020. The Miami-Dade schools began a staggered return to school that October. As students resumed classes, the union raised the heat on its rhetoric.

“Lives are going to be lost,” said UTD President Karla Hernández-Mats in September.³⁵ She was joined by Anna Fusco, president of the Broward Teachers Union, who asked, “What will you do when the deaths start happening?”

Recent research demonstrates that this view was unnecessarily alarmist. CDC researchers studied the Florida reopening and published their findings for the semester that ran from August through December 2020.³⁶ They found that fewer than one percent of students developed school-related COVID and that

CDC researchers studied the Florida reopening and published their findings for the semester that ran from August through December 2020. They found that fewer than one percent of students developed school-related COVID and that “resumption of in-person education was not associated with a proportionate increase in COVID-19 among school-aged children.” There were only 101 hospitalizations and no deaths among an estimated 2.8 million K-12 students.

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Among more than 33,000 Miami-Dade school district employees, there were 219 hospitalizations and 13 deaths, with nine of the deaths including other risk factors. Although all of these are tragic and regrettable, the researchers concluded that their findings “add to a growing body of evidence suggesting that COVID-19 transmission does not appear to be demonstrably more frequent in schools than in noneducational settings.”

UTD was unable to effect any significant change in the district’s stance on in-person schooling. The union’s actions were primarily on the communications front, raising the alarm about infected staff and students and organizing a letter writing campaign for the school board to hear teachers’ safety concerns.³⁷

Despite the union’s efforts, about 89 percent of students returned to school on January 4, 2021. The union claimed the schools were “in a public health crisis with no end in sight.”

Though schools had been open for months, UTD pushed to delay reopening until after winter break.³⁸ Despite the union’s efforts, about 89 percent of students returned to school on January 4, 2021. The union claimed the schools were “in a public health crisis with no end in sight.”³⁹

While the UTD warned that the schools were unsafe, it also applauded itself, stating “unionized educators are playing a critical role in clarifying potentially deadly misinformation.”⁴⁰

In May 2021, the union began negotiations with the district over the use of federal funds.⁴¹ Miami also has declining enrollment, so the union sought to use the new money to increase per-pupil spending and, like the other teacher unions, reduce class sizes while hiring more counselors, psychologists, and social workers.

Miami-Dade schools reopened for classroom instruction on August 23, 2021.

Clark County Public Schools and the Clark County Education Association

The Clark County School District in Nevada encompasses cities in the Greater Las Vegas area and has a unique labor situation with its employees.

The CCEA was one of the largest local affiliates of the NEA until 2018, when a dispute over dues distribution led CCEA to withdraw from both national and Nevada state unions.⁴² It is now the largest independent teacher union in the United States.

Considering this recent history, it is perhaps not surprising that CCEA demonstrated some traditional teacher union traits, as well as some uncharacteristic flexibility.

In March 2020, CCEA supported statewide school closures, adding that Nevada’s governor needed to ensure that the school district “has the funds to pay all employees while the schools are not in operation.”⁴³

When the district generated a reopening plan four months later, CCEA announced its opposition, again citing the need for more resources. The union stated it would “support every educator and parent who chooses not to participate in the reopening.”⁴⁴

School began as remote-only in August 2020, and by the next month, the union signaled ever so lightly that it would support a reopening plan, provided it contained a series of safety and health procedures.⁴⁵ In October, John Vellardita, the union’s executive director, told the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* that he did not believe distance learning was sustainable for an entire school year and that he wanted to see schools reopen.⁴⁶

The next month saw another gradual step forward as the district released a plan to shift students to a hybrid remote/in-person model beginning in December 2020.⁴⁷ CCEA did not immediately agree to the plan but indicated optimism about a deal.

In late December 2020, the district and the union reached an agreement to a slow return of pre-K through third grade students to the classroom; however, by mid-January 2021, increased community spread of COVID-19 caused the district plan to be “dramatically scaled back.”⁴⁸

The CCEA and the school district agreed to a comprehensive timeline in late February 2021⁴⁹ that introduced hybrid learning for all grades in a staggered schedule, beginning with pre-K through grade 3 on March 1 and ending with secondary students on April 6. On April 6, pre-K through grade 5 students would also return to the classroom five days a week.

During summer 2021, when the district instituted a mask mandate and a weekly COVID testing requirement for all employees, CCEA lent its support. As for a vaccine mandate for employees: “If it becomes a mandate and it’s legally defensible, we’re not gonna stand in the way of that,” said Vellardita.⁵⁰

Reopening Clark County schools proceeded at a glacial pace, but it appears union demands were not the primary cause for delay. The district and the union seemed to agree on most measures, accounting for the relative lack of invective.

Clark County schools reopened for classroom instruction on August 9, 2021.

Houston Independent School District and the Houston Federation of Teachers

Alone among the states reviewed in this report, Texas does not allow collective bargaining by public school employees.⁵¹ Unions are limited to conferring with district officials, and they have to rely on their lobbying and public relations skills to enact their policies.

After closures in March 2020, Houston school district officials announced in June that the 2020-21 school year would begin on schedule on August 24, 2020. The HFT called the district's plan "stunningly inadequate" and charged that the district was "in no way, shape or form prepared" to reopen in the fall.⁵²

In collaboration with "stakeholders," which consisted mostly of other unions and the Houston Democratic Socialists of America, the union released its own plan.⁵³ The recommendations deemed "essential for reopening" recited familiar demands:

- A decline in the number of new COVID cases for at least 14 consecutive days
- The closure of nonessential businesses
- Funding schools on enrollment instead of average daily attendance
- A "massive investment in public schools"
- Adding racial and economic justice equity assessments to reopening plans
- Suspension of high-stakes testing
- Suspension of teacher and staff evaluations
- Funding for additional staff
- Free universal access to the internet
- Individual teachers and staff cannot be required to return to in-person instruction
- A nurse at every school
- Maximum class size of 15 students
- Hazard pay for custodial staff

The school district deflected HFT's demands, but by July 2020, the district had relented on the fall reopening. Classes would start remotely, with a tentative classroom reopening date of October 19, 2020. The unions applauded the decision.

"We don't believe allowing individual parental choice is the right way to go. It is the job of the public education system to make the best decision for all students."

HFT president Zeph Capo

Zeph Capo, HFT president, even called the district's plan one of the better ones he had seen. "I think the district did a really good job of listening to stakeholders and ultimately making the decision to do their best to keep everyone safe," he said. Regarding the transition back to classrooms, he added, "We don't believe allowing individual parental choice is the right way to go. It is the job of the public education system to make the best decision for all students."⁵⁴

The positive feeling did not last very long. Just before reopening day, HFT organized a caravan to circle district headquarters. Some vehicles sported signs that read, "I cannot teach from a casket."⁵⁵

Schools reopened on schedule, but within a few days teachers had staged a sick-out protest.⁵⁶ They demanded capping class sizes at 15 students, serving meals outside instead of in classrooms, and adding mask policies to the student and staff code of conduct.

By the second week, the union was spreading alarm. "The teachers right now are absolutely at the brink," said HFT executive vice president Andrew Dewey. "They are overwhelmed with work. They're overwhelmed with fear for their own safety."⁵⁷

The union soon called on the district to return to online-only school after the Thanksgiving break through the end of the semester.⁵⁸ The district continued with in-person instruction.

The availability of vaccines in early 2021 diminished much of the back-and-forth between the district and the union, and the vast majority of Houston teachers provided classroom instruction to the end of the school year.

Houston school district officials later announced that the 2021-22 school year would begin entirely in-person, prompting skepticism from the union. "Frankly, we're asking the same questions we were asking a year ago," said HFT's Dewey. "It's depressing."⁵⁹

Houston ISD schools reopened for classroom instruction on August 23, 2021.

Fairfax County Public Schools, the Fairfax Education Association, and the Fairfax County Federation of Teachers

Effective May 1, 2021, Virginia authorized counties and municipalities to recognize labor unions as bargaining agents of public sector employees and to negotiate collective bargaining agreements. Notwithstanding this lack of recognition and collective bargaining power prior to May 1, the NEA and the AFT maintained affiliates in Fairfax County (the Fairfax Education Association [FEA] and the Fairfax County Federation of Teachers [FCFT]) that jockeyed for influence during the pandemic. Notably, a majority of the district's school employees do not belong to the FEA and the FCFT.

Neither the FEA nor the FCFT was shy about expressing opinions on Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) reopening for the 2020-21 school year.

"Our educators are overwhelmingly not comfortable returning to schools," said FCFT President Tina Williams in June 2020. "They fear for their lives, the lives of their students and the lives of their families."⁶⁰

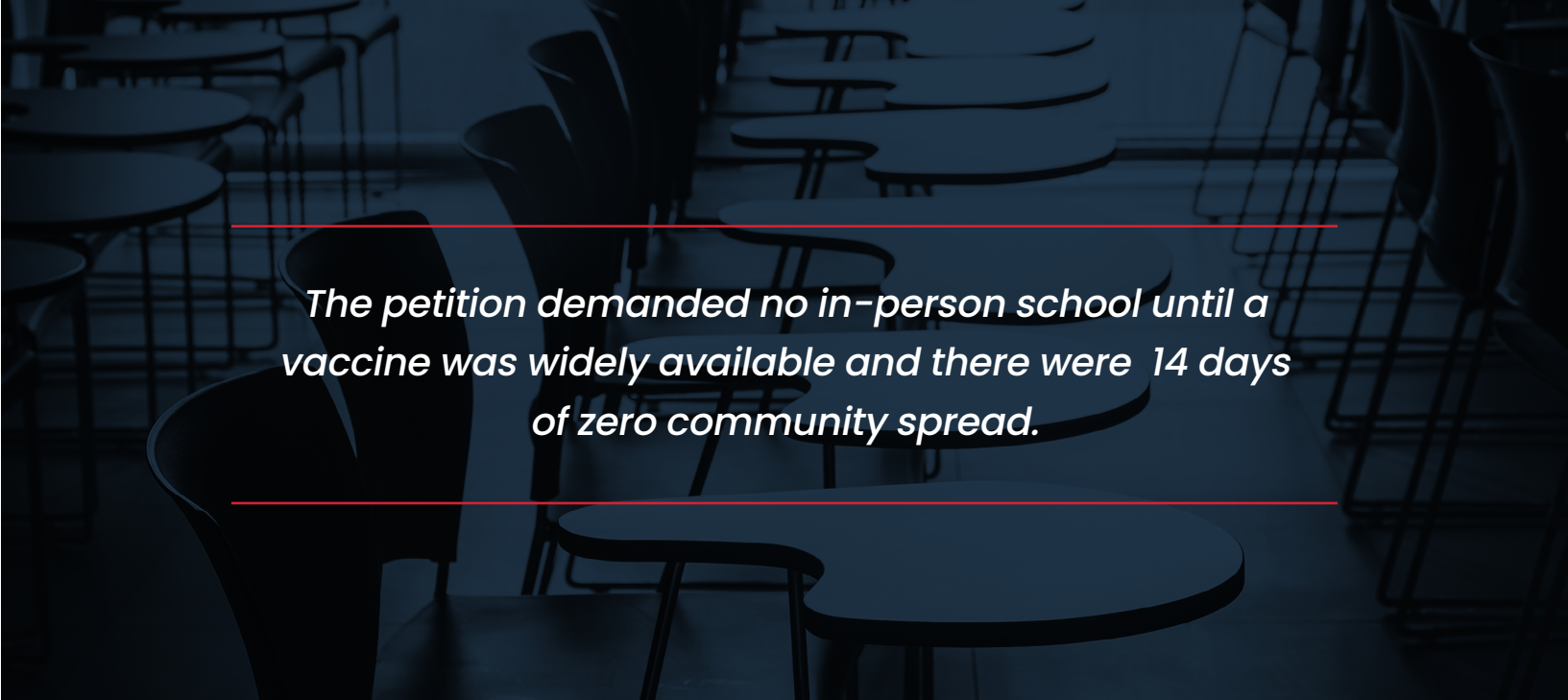
FCFT demanded 100 percent virtual learning, stating that implementing even a hybrid plan by September 8, 2020, was "unrealistic."⁶¹

Kimberly Adams, FEA president, had a very specific benchmark in mind. "We believe our community as a whole should not return to in-person learning until a vaccine or treatment is widely available for COVID-19," she said.⁶²

FCPS acquiesced and did not reopen schools at the start the 2020-21 school year.

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When FCPS wanted to phase in reopening for 650 employees in October 2020, Adams said she was expecting teacher resignations by the hundreds, if not the thousands.⁶³ Her union then organized a petition online that called for virtual-only school for the entire 2020-21 year.⁶⁴



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"We are urging FCPS to delay reopening until there is a clear plan in place to keep everyone safe and the district adopts our 11 pillars of a safe reopening,"⁶⁵ said FCFT President Tina Williams.⁶⁶

In October 2020, the FCPS superintendent outlined a plan that would return students in stages two days a week from November 2020 through late January 2021. In response, FEA urged teachers to call in sick, taking a "mental health day."⁶⁷

FCPS managed to return a small percentage of students to the classroom in November but delayed its schedule for adding more amid growing community spread of the virus. By that time, FCFT had its own online petition seeking to delay reopening.⁶⁸

"It isn't safe for anyone to be in our buildings right now," said Williams.⁶⁹

When the vaccine became available in January 2021, teachers were put on the priority list, but when the district wanted to phase in a February return to the classroom, Adams made a new demand. "We think all students need to be vaccinated before in-person instruction resumes full time," she said.⁷⁰

By March 2021, FCPS offered all students a hybrid option, but full in-person school was postponed until the fall of 2021. Both unions approved vaccination mandates, as long as they were coupled with weekly COVID testing for those remaining unvaccinated.

Fairfax County schools reopened for classroom instruction on August 23, 2021.

Conclusion

The record in seven large school districts demonstrates that the teacher union response to school reopening plans differed only in degree, regardless of whether the local union was affiliated with the NEA or the AFT or independent. It also did not matter if state or local politics were union-friendly or not. In no instance did teacher unions advocate for schools to reopen with in-person classroom instruction. On the contrary, they were classroom instruction's primary opponents during the pandemic.

In no instance did teacher unions advocate for schools to reopen with in-person classroom instruction. On the contrary, they were classroom instruction's primary opponents during the pandemic.

AFT President Weingarten uttered the remark cited at the opening of this report in March 2021. How do teacher unions today see their current and past stances on reopening?

The Atlantic published an interview with NEA President Becky Pringle on August 20, 2021, that illustrates their current positioning.⁷¹

"When we shut down on a dime in the spring of 2020, no one wanted to be back to in-person learning more than educators," she said. "It's why we worked so hard for schools to reopen."

She added, "The schools that stayed open were school districts that worked directly with educators and with their unions to make decisions that were best in terms of keeping students and all of the people in that population healthy."

This is simply untrue. Researchers from Boston College and the University of North Texas examined the effect of union power on school reopening decisions.⁷² They concluded that "larger school districts where unions are undoubtedly stronger on average are far more likely to heed the preferences of unions to keep in-person schooling closed and rely on fully remote (online) models of teaching and learning."

After controlling for other factors, they found that "districts with collective bargaining are 40 percent likely to remain in remote learning."

This is entirely consistent not only with media accounts from around the United States, but also with the situation in several European countries.⁷³ Teacher union opposition to in-person schooling has been the rule throughout the length of the pandemic, not the exception.

This stance benefitted the unions. They were able to position themselves as the defenders of their members' health and safety while they and their members received full salaries and benefits. "The union's always going to say that we're safer remote," said Columbus Education Association President John Coneglio. "Our teachers are safer and our students are safer when we're in remote learning."⁷⁴

This was a simple argument designed to appeal to teachers, and it worked. There was little internal union member opposition to remote-only schooling; in several districts, the unions saw the pandemic as an opportunity to fulfill items on their wish lists. The massive influx of federal funding flowing from the CARES Act, the CRSSA Act, and the ARP will fulfill many of these policy dreams.

Where the unions miscalculated was on the reaction of the parents of schoolchildren and the public, who correctly saw the teacher unions as being the main obstacles to reopening schools. Sensitive to their public image, the unions have responded with the message that they actually fought to reopen schools and are the main reasons that schools reopened safely for the 2021-22 school year.

Indeed, the NEA and the AFT and their affiliates are a combined annual enterprise of more than \$2 billion.⁷⁵ They employ large numbers of highly paid communications professionals to ensure their point of view works its way into the eyes and ears of the American public. Their officers are mainstays on television and social media.

Whether teacher unions are good, bad, or neutral is an individual judgment. Similarly, it is for each individual to decide whether union representation of classroom teachers in district negotiations best serves the interests of students, schools, and society; however, teacher unions are indisputably an interest group, and parents and other members of the public should consider their statements and communications like any other self-interested advertisement or promotional message.

When the teacher union message conflicts with objective facts, it needs to be rejected.

Mike Antonucci

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Mike has covered the education beat since 1993. *Education Week* called him “the nation’s leading observer — and critic — of the two national teachers’ unions and their affiliates.” Mike’s writings have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, *Investor’s Business Daily*, *The American Enterprise*, and many other periodicals, and his work has been favorably cited in the *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *New York Post*, and a host of other prominent daily newspapers. He currently writes a weekly column called Union Report for *The 74*.

Mike’s background in research stems from his previous writing of military history. His article on the diplomacy of the Byzantine Empire is included in *Annual Editions: Western Civilization, Volume 1* by William Hughes, published by Dushkin/McGraw Hill. His article on codebreaking in the Civil War was published as a cover story by *Civil War Times Illustrated* and in *Spies and Secret Missions: A History of American Espionage*. He has had feature articles published in *Military History*, *The Foreign Service Journal*, *History Today*, *Command*, *Wild West* and many others.

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