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COVID-19: Going Back to School Safely
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Good morning, Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray and Members of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify at today's hearing, "COVID-19: Going Back to School Safely." I very much appreciate the opportunity to share Tennessee's story, and incredible work that continues to be done by our districts, educators, and department of education on behalf of our students.

As commissioner at the Tennessee Department of Education, I feel strongly that our agency must work to support high-quality educational opportunities for the nearly one million students in our care. While this is true every day, it is even more important to set a clear focus on this work now, so that we can ensure no child is more disadvantaged by the current COVID-19 pandemic and that our schools and districts are supported moving into and throughout next year and beyond. Although I have the privilege of serving as commissioner, I am also a mother of three children, with one whose adoption was finalized last week. I have seen first-hand the impact of this pandemic at the classroom level, specifically for my school age daughter's learning and for her teacher in our local public school system. Yet I also know that even with the challenges we face, we must collectively seize opportunities to excel.

To understand where we are headed, we must look back to when this pandemic began, and how our state has collaborated and come together along the way to ensure our children are safe, healthy, and like every year, ready to face the challenges and seize the opportunities of a new school year.

On March 16, 2020, Governor Bill Lee urged public school districts in Tennessee to close to protect the health and well-being of Tennessee students, teachers, and communities across the state. On April 15th, Governor Lee recommended extending public school closures through the end of the school year. In each instance, all public-school districts in Tennessee followed the governor's recommendation.

This launched an unprecedented need for COVID response work for Tennessee schools, districts, and the state department of education.

Prioritizing both the health and safety of students as well as academic instruction, the Tennessee Department of Education team responded swiftly and began working diligently to communicate with districts and issue guidance to help them make plans and decisions to **ensure a continuation of academic instruction as well as critical meal and other services for students** during times of school closure. Central to this work has been the department's engagement with stakeholders, specifically with school superintendents, educators, and

policymakers to seek input and feedback both to inform the response and to help prioritize urgent needs of districts, schools, educators, and students during a public health crisis. At the department, we knew we needed—and will continue to need—this input to formulate the most effective ways to help school districts address student, family, and educator needs resulting from the coronavirus pandemic.

On March 16th, the department began hosting three times per week conference calls for superintendents, which continue to this day. These regular conference calls have fostered ***close coordination with superintendents across the state*** and been a valuable tool for the department to provide updates, answer questions, and solicit feedback.

The department began sharing health and safety resources developed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and the Tennessee Department of Health, and developing a series of guidance and toolkits focused on the specific needs, challenges, and decision-making that school and school district leaders had to address, including:

Guidance Documents

- Cleaning Guidance
- Coronavirus: A Guide for Schools
- Emergency Plans & Procedures for Schools
- Federal Programs and Funding
- Guidelines for Health Care in a School Setting
- Handwashing Best Practices
- Infection Control Tips for School Buses
- Instruction, Assessment, and Accountability
- Nutrition
- Special Populations
- Staffing, Educators, and EPP Resources

School Closure Toolkits

- Academics and Instruction
- Early Childhood
- Finance
- Fine Arts
- Health and Wellness
- IT and Distance Learning
- Nutrition
- Safety and Operations
- School-administered Before/ After Care Programs
- Special Populations
- Staffing

The department also developed school closure toolkits for families, made available in English and Spanish, to assist families in identifying resources and making plans to support the academic and nonacademic needs of children while out of school. Utilization of these resources was robust, with over 250,000 views of our COVID-19 website, but the needed response to address the impacts of coronavirus went far beyond the capacity of many districts in Tennessee, especially those that are small or rural.

With the passage of time and conversations moving past the immediate response to COVID-19 and the resulting school building closures, we began to sense how the pandemic is elevating known gaps and required even more acceleration of ***a child-centered strategy***.

To support districts and schools as they were navigating an unprecedented challenge, the department began work to develop ***partnerships that provide resources and supports for students and educators***.

The department brokered several critical partnerships which, in true Volunteer State spirit, led to a variety of **free, optional resources to support educators, principals, families, and students across the state**. These include:

- Partnership with all 6 Tennessee **PBS stations** to deliver up to 30 hours per week of daily academic instruction and educational content to first through eighth grade students during times of school closure. Developed by the department in collaboration with Tennessee teachers, three hundred and twenty lessons on math and English language arts were broadcasted statewide. These videos are also posted on the department's YouTube page where they have received over 77,000 views. Accompanying lesson plans for educators and student work packets are available on the department's website.
- Partnership with the University of Tennessee's Center for Educational Leadership to support principals at no cost as they lead their staff and schools in addressing student needs. The **Tennessee Principal Professional Learning Series** leverages the intellectual resources of the university, as well as other external expertise, to address the most pressing problems of practice facing school principals. As of June 6th, more than 500 principals representing 82 of Tennessee's 95 counties have completed this training.
- Partnership with Trevecca Nazarene University to offer **free professional development for Tennessee teachers** to help them prepare for digital teaching and learning. As of June 6th, over 14,000 Tennessee teachers have participated in this training.
- Partnership with the ReadyRosie early education platform to provide Tennessee families with **free and easy access to critical early literacy lessons**. Around two minutes long in both English and Spanish, the video "moments" feature real families demonstrating instructional activities that parents can then replicate with their own children and are rooted in learning goals for children on topics such as literacy, early math, health and well-being.
- Partnership with Hoonuit to provide families with the most **up-to-date information on meal pick-up locations closest to them** through SchoolMealFinder.com. Hoonuit utilizes an interactive map to allow users to search by city, zip code, and address to locate the nearest food pick-up site.
- Partnership with the Tennessee STEM Innovation Network (TSIN) to develop the STE(A)M Resource Hub to provide three weekly challenges to promote **critical thinking and career exploration** that can all be done in the home. The challenges are ideal for students grades 3-12, but younger students can also participate with parental assistance.

While we know these partnerships and the resulting resources helped to fill some gaps that emerged following school building closures, more significant challenges within our field have become apparent. In some cases, there are new challenges that we must face together. In other cases, they are challenges that have been brought to the forefront of the public consciousness and demand to be addressed.

Achievement Gaps: We are incredibly proud that Tennessee was the fastest improving state from 2011-2015. Still, achievement gaps have not closed and school building closures will likely serve to widen those gaps further. This is not a new challenge, but the pandemic has served to poignantly

highlight existing gaps in student achievement and opportunity. As educators and students navigate a new distance learning environment, there is a need for innovative resources to support learning.

Rural Communities: School building closures have continued to highlight the disparity related to connectivity and broadband, access to more community resources, and opportunities to raise and use local funds in support of public schools in our rural communities.

Early Literacy: In Tennessee, just over 33% of 3rd graders and 27% of 8th graders are reading proficiently. Reading proficiency in 3rd grade is one of the most important indicators for future success and must continue to be an area of focus. School building closures will likely exacerbate this challenge, especially for children in our youngest grades.

Mental Health: The pandemic has highlighted the significant challenges that districts, schools, and educators face related to student mental health and behavioral needs. School building closures have brought this conversation to the forefront as children and families struggle with the anxieties associated with the pandemic, and in some cases additional familial struggles that would normally be identified and addressed earlier by schools.

We know for certain that our education community will work to support our students. By working collaboratively with educators and district leaders, investing in high-quality materials and supporting the implementation of best practices, we will continue to accelerate the work that moves our field forward. We must invest in both resources and people.

While there are some policy conversations that need to take place to address the impacts of the pandemic, we have also seen that **educators will step-up to fill the space.**

However, merely stating the expectations does not mean people can meet them. We have seen that schools and districts are rapidly trying to pivot to address the current needs, with minimal time for development or meaningful support. We must create opportunities to provide resources and professional development opportunities to our educators and system leads.

To be clear, this is complicated. Any decision we make has significant costs and there are no easy answers. There is no one-size fits all solution for a state as regionally varied as Tennessee. This is why the role of the state education agency is so important – it is the critical link between policy and practice. It considers the broader landscape of policy decisions and then works to determine how to make those applicable and real for practitioners that are making important school reopening decisions for their local communities.

Given that, as we plan for school reopening this fall, we must ask ourselves: What is in the best interest of students and staff, as we balance the needs of community health with the needs of children to have access to strong educational opportunities, families to financially support themselves, and critical services to be delivered to students?

School reopening must put the health and safety of our children, their teachers, and our communities front of mind.

Tennessee has been a national leader when it comes to testing for COVID-19. Already, 7.3% of Tennesseans have been tested, with sites available across the state. **Tennessee ranks in the top 12 states for testing per**

capita and in lowest percentage of positive cases. The department of education will continue to work closely with Governor Bill Lee's COVID-19 Unified Command group¹ and the Tennessee Department of Health to coordinate testing efforts with districts and ensure that any school personnel or any families interested in testing have the opportunity to do so.

Further, in close partnership with Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA) and Unified Command, the department will be able to provide Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) like masks and no-touch thermometers to our districts at no cost to utilize if and how they choose. The department is coordinating efforts geared towards reducing some of the financial burden associated with health and social distancing recommendations.

Considering that and the recent guidance from the U.S. Centers of Disease Control, the department will continue to offer a suite of resources to districts. In the first weeks of school, we are encouraging districts to monitor key statistics to manage the success of reopening. Those include: availability and use of PPE; reported virus cases and spread statistics in the school, district, and community; frequency of disinfection of materials and shared areas; quarantine/illness space needed vs. available; physical and virtual attendance of staff and students; and other metrics comparable to prior years (ex. counseling, staffing, nutrition, etc.).

We have also identified significant operational needs that may exist in our districts, which cover a range of topics, including:

- Procurement of disinfecting and personal hygiene supplies
- Classroom reconfiguration to maximize the ability of students and staff while socially distancing from one another
- Cohorting consistent small groups of students for recreation and eating
- Elimination of assembly and mass gathering
- Procurement of signage to communicate policies and procedures to staff, students and families
- Implementation of daily symptom checking of students and staff, to include non-contact temperatures upon arrival when feasible
- Need for additional janitorial service to perform regular and frequent cleaning of high-touch surfaces in restrooms, hallways and classrooms
- Bus ridership for costing out additional or multi-trip routes, if needed
- Minimized community entry into the school and exposure to students, including parent drop-off and consideration of staggered drop-off times and
- Isolated illness spaces and protocols for immediate removal of symptomatic individuals

These are just a handful of the significant operational and logistical considerations that must be taken at the school and district level. While schools are not typically built for this level of operational emergency and health response, districts are working diligently to make the changes necessary to keep people safe. As such, our systems must also remain flexible enough to make changes as the data indicates.

School reopening must include a series of scenarios from which local districts may operate, in the best interest of local needs.

¹ The Unified-Command Group is a COVID-19 response tactic that merged the Department of Health, Department of Military and Tennessee Emergency Management Agency to streamline COVID-19 response efforts

Broader policy conversations have discussed the three ways in which schools can reopen: physically in person, in a distance format, or in a hybrid format. However, our schools require much more guidance than that. Many of our schools do not have the physical capacity to house a full student body and maintain social distancing but may also have the need or desire to ensure all children receive a commensurate high-quality education in-person (as able). Over the last month, I spent time setting-up example demonstration classrooms in regions across the state. Depending on the classroom size, intended capacity, and student needs, both myself and the teachers who provided feedback were struck by the various ways teaching and learning may need to adjust.

To support this local decision-making, the department released guidance that added options within those broad categories. For physical return to schools, the department has suggested that districts consider a traditional return, a staggered return over a set period of time, a staggered schedule to minimize physical occupancy, or a year-round schedule to reduce physical capacity.

For virtual or distance options, there are the possibilities of virtual synchronous models as well as asynchronous models where students learn at a self-pace during the day with the support of their teachers. As noted in the spring, the universal access to technology and internet is a significant concern for many districts and families, especially those in rural communities, serving less resourced populations, or vulnerable student groups. These are significant considerations that districts must discuss at a local level, and for which the state would encourage application of the U.S. Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) funding to support.

For those districts considering a split model, the department has provided alternatives for split days with morning and afternoon cohorts, alternating days or weeks, or attendance based on need to accommodate children with disabilities and those requiring additional services.

The department has also presented a category related to cyclical or intermittent distance education based on staff and family choice or a virus resurgence. Regardless of the options selected, students and staff with personal or household health risks must have a viable option for maintaining their education or employment from home.

The decision on how to reopen schools is a challenging one which balances health and education. Both are important to the future of our children and all facts must be included in the discussion as it progresses. Each of the scenarios listed above include opportunities for flexibilities and options within the model. What is most critical is that local needs, resources and statistics drive decision-making within the framework and boundaries outlined through the Departments of Health and Education.

School reopening must include supports for our local districts, as needs increase and resource efficiencies become critical. This must be done with a child-centered strategy.

We must address students' academic and physical and mental health needs. Regardless of the reopening option(s), districts will still need ways to determine the academic, physical and mental health needs of returning students. Districts should ensure that there is a whole child plan in place to address the different social and mental health needs that may exist for some students due to school closures and resulting from the impact of the pandemic and recent events.

We must provide a virtual option for the most vulnerable students and staff members. Until there is a vaccine for COVID-19, there is still a risk of seasonal waves of the virus. So, the most vulnerable students and staff (those with underlying health conditions or undergoing disease treatment) may not be able to return to a school campus. Social distancing is difficult in public spaces and even more challenging in the typical classroom or campus setting. Districts may identify and provide high-quality distance learning to vulnerable student populations and should clearly communicate the options to families.

We must provide strong opportunities for students requiring at-home care. Students who are diagnosed and/or live in a home with a confirmed positive case may be required to isolate for days on end and there will need to be accommodations made to support that student.

We must stay committed to identifying and addressing any gaps that we see in student achievement, which will necessitate a beginning of the year progress check. Districts should ensure that any diagnostic (or optional checkpoint tool provided by the state at no cost) used in the fall is aligned with state standards and is accompanied by quick turnaround. These assessments should be used for information purposes only, to better capture student learning and needs and to ensure educators and families have information to provide an understanding of where their students are starting for the year.

Guidance documents are being developed by the department to support that locally driven effort.

The department is in the process of developing and finalizing over 20 school reopening toolkits, which will cover many of the same topics as school closure toolkits did. Over the course of the next few weeks, these resources will be provided to district leaders, many of whom contributed to the content and framing of this work as a reflection of what authentic and meaningful partnership can look like in times of uncertainty.

These *school reopening toolkits* will include:

- Academics
- Assessing Student Learning
- Childcare
- Communications
- Consolidated Funding Applications
- Counseling
- Equitable Access and Opportunity
- Finance
- Governance and Management
- Health and Public Health
- Nutrition
- Policy and Legal Considerations
- Postsecondary Transitions
- Procedures
- Professional Development
- Public Charter and Non-Public Schools
- Safety and Operations: Emergency Operations, Pandemic, Post-recovery Evaluation
- School Improvement
- Social Distancing at Schools
- Special Populations
- Staffing
- Technology
- Transportation
- Wellbeing and Mental Health

While we sincerely hope and believe these resources will be critical for districts as they make the best decisions for their local communities, we must acknowledge that beginning a new school year this year might be different. Children and educators have experienced a global pandemic; their lives or livelihoods may have been impacted; they need to feel safe; and they will still face the exciting challenges and opportunities of starting a brand-new school year.

No different than the past several months, the work of reopening schools and addressing the academic and whole child needs of all children will be like never before. We are navigating the very fabric of education and how we build critical relationships, deliver excellent instruction, and provide opportunities for all of our children to thrive.

This is difficult work and I have been inspired day after day by the way that Tennesseans have come together and shown our collective love for children and commitment to their wellbeing. As a commissioner, a former teacher, and a mother, I applaud and appreciate the hard work of our school communities.

We must continue to pull together, work hard, and keep pace. Our commitment to our children is unwavering, and I also know that in many ways doing this is a marathon that we have all been running at a full sprint. I am confident that we will be stronger after this, and that we will use the innovative spirit of our Tennessee educators and districts to continue accelerating the achievement of our children.

I hope we are all able to appreciate what has been done, focus on what is left to do and remember what still lies ahead.

Thank you and I look forward to answering any questions from the committee members about the great work being done in the Volunteer State.