

CCPTA Email to School Board and County Board on Safe Eating

From: CCPTA VPPolicy <ccptavppolicyarlington@gmail.com>

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Subject: urgent need to address safe eating in schools

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Dear School Board and County Board Members,

The executive board of the County Council of PTAs (CCPTA) believes that the very recent surge in Delta variant Covid-19 transmission requires that our community reassess our prior risk tolerances for students returning to school. Many well-intentioned decisions were made months ago based on data derived from a less-contagious Covid-19 variant, but conditions have changed, guidance has changed as recently as last week, and **we must pivot immediately**.

Guidance on K-12 school reopening from both the Virginia Department of Health^[1] and the CDC^[2] emphasizes layers of prevention, meaning that multiple strategies – deployed consistently – are needed. We have heard repeatedly from parents that they are expecting schools to follow this layered approach, but we are concerned that current re-opening plans may allow for too much discretion or deploy strategies inconsistently, and therefore may fall far short of this expectation.

For example, current plans for elementary school mealtimes are missing four out of five of the expected layers that VDH and CDC call for. Elementary students are not yet authorized to receive the vaccine, and won't be masked while eating. Physical distancing is not attainable in the cafeteria at current enrollment levels, and many of the ventilation studies of school buildings^[3] were conducted at less than full capacity, yet still indicated airflow rates that fell below the CDC recommended levels of 6-12 ACH.^[4]

In a nutshell, only one layer of protection – hand hygiene – is being planned for consistent use by elementary students eating in schools. Functionally, this leaves us no better off than many communities that are forgoing layers of consistent protection and are now being hit with runaway Covid-19 transmission rates. This is unacceptable – our children need layers of protection, used consistently, even on inclement weather days, even during breakfast or lunch.

The CCPTA executive board respectfully urges you to insist upon deployment of as many layers of protection as are practicable to ALL students at ALL times during the school day, and to not accept that only one layer – hand hygiene – is at times all that is standing between a child and Covid-19. We believe this is a matter of regional public health, because failure to prevent an outbreak would not only disrupt learning, but it would have ripple effects as workers called in sick, transmission persisted beyond the student population, and hospital beds filled up. This is not a hypothetical – we are already witnessing what happens when communities re-open schools without layers of protection against the Delta variant.

Therefore, we ask that both the school and the county make concrete plans to deploy personnel, equipment, and resources as needed to ensure a layered standard is met. Specifically, we need to move meals outdoors as fully as possible, as was discussed last spring with both the County Board and School Board, and to make contingency plans for dispersed eating inside buildings that meets the CDC / VDH standards for distance and/or ventilation when inclement weather prevents outdoor eating. The CCPTA has communicated to APS leadership that we are ready to help mobilize parent volunteers to supervise meals as needed, and we stand ready to help in any other way we can.

We look forward to working with you on creative solutions – even temporary ones, until vaccines for <12 can be added as a strategy – for preventing the serious public health risk and erosion of public trust that would accompany a school-based outbreak in our community.

Sincerely,

CCPTA Executive Board
Mary Kadera, Interim President
Claire Noakes, VP Policy
Mike O'Leary, Secretary
Kendra Anderson, Treasurer

^[1] <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/content/uploads/sites/182/2021/03/Interim-Guidance-to-K-12-School-Reopening.pdf> (updated Aug. 12, 2021).

^[2] <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/k-12-guidance.html> (updated Aug. 5, 2021).

^[3] <https://www.apsva.us/maintenance/return-to-school-building-ventilation-studies/>

^[4] <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/ventilation.html>