



Dear Woodburn Community,

We are the Woodburn Education Association, and we represent the more than 350 licensed educators in the Woodburn School District. We care about our community, which is why we feel it necessary to write this open letter to you.

In the middle of a panicked rush to return to onsite learning, it is time to speak and act from the inner belief that called upon us to become educators in the first place: We value people. We value lives. We value learning. Because we value people and their lives, in the midst of this ever-accelerating and deadly pandemic, we speak our truth:

**Given current circumstances, we support a virtual return, rather than a physical return to our school buildings at the end of August 2020.**

We have watched the Incidence Rate of COVID-19 for the Woodburn area increase to 1255.9 per 100,000 residents, meaning that over 1% of the entire population of the 97071 zip code has been diagnosed, one of the highest rates in Oregon and exceeding the rate of places like Houston and Dallas, TX, which are seen as hot-spots for COVID in the nation. Meanwhile, we have observed the development of in-person learning models being “fast-tracked” in order to meet ODE deadlines.

The Woodburn Education Association, representing the collective of licensed educators in the Woodburn School District, believes unequivocally that it is unsafe for both students and educators to resume in-person instruction at the present time.

We believe on-site learning is a false promise and a dangerous choice at this time. Woodburn’s summer school program was shut down due to COVID Exposure. The shutdown by local health authorities of Woodburn’s entire Summer School Camp CARE was due to one employee’s exposure to COVID. If one confirmed positive case was enough for an entire summer school program to be shuttered, it is hard to fathom how in-person instruction for an entire school can successfully take place. As the fall semester resumes and students and educators inevitably test positive for Coronavirus it will become increasingly clear that a hybrid learning model will not be able to provide the careful, step-by-step growth of each learner will need to thrive.

We value authentic learning. We know full well that the unique relationship and special bond that exists between teachers and students is something that simply cannot be reproduced virtually. We long to one day reunite with students within the nurturing atmosphere of our classrooms.

However, the health and **safety of our students and educators must take priority**. Until the health and safety of staff and students can be assured, we intend to vigorously oppose any plan to physically reopen schools.

We value lives. Because of the long-term consequences of racism and poverty, the majority of Woodburn families, including many educators, are especially vulnerable to the disastrous effects of COVID-19. We have already seen the disproportionate impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on our communities of color in the rates of confirmed COVID-19 cases. Despite accounting for only 27% of Marion County's population, the Latinx community has experienced 37% of the county's confirmed COVID cases. Eighty-five percent of the Woodburn School District student population identifies as being a person of color, including 83% of students identifying as Latinx. Forcing schools to reopen on-site learning during an accelerating pandemic will result in a disproportionate risk to the lives of our Black and Brown students, along with their families.

We teach a significant number of students whose families are migrants, farmworkers and essential workers in agricultural or service industries, and 95% of our students qualify for free and reduced lunch. These families typically have insufficient health care, higher levels of preexisting health conditions, and often live in multigenerational households. To reopen public schools is to put these communities at an increased risk.

Nearly one in four teachers in the United States, have a condition that puts them at higher risk of serious illness from coronavirus, and Oregon is no exception. For higher-risk teachers, failure to achieve safe working conditions could have very serious results. Effective educators in high poverty bilingual contexts are precious to our community, and, like our students and their families, are not expendable. For decades we have asked educators to give their financial resources and their mental health in the name of public education - we cannot ask them to sacrifice their physical health as well.

Before in-person instruction can resume in our neighborhood public schools, our communities must achieve a significant reduction in new cases and broad community-based COVID-19 testing and contact tracing protocols. Currently, Oregon continues to fall far short of these public health benchmarks, and continues to experience delays in community testing. Marion County, in particular, has the lowest rate of testing out of the five metropolitan counties in the state (Multnomah, Clackamas, Washington, and Lane being the other four), despite having the highest rate of infection and double the rate of positive tests. Without adequate testing, we cannot be certain of the true impact of this virus on our community, which makes returning to school buildings an even more dangerous prospect. Any planned return to in-person learning should be dictated by science, not politics or the stock market.

Educators value learning, lives and the people of our community. Consequently, we are calling on WSD to press "pause" on their plans to start the school year with on-site learning and instead use this time to make distance learning better for all, including educators, parents and students. For now, let's invest in providing affordable childcare, Internet access and hotspots for our families and educators. Let's collect and analyze input from our families and students. When we're ready to reopen, let's invest in smaller class sizes, adequate custodial and nursing staff in every building, and ensure school-based COVID-19 testing for all, with a priority for our uninsured and undocumented families.

Woodburn Education Association Leadership