



November 20, 2020

To Chairman John McIntye and the members of the McLean County Board:

Like all of you, we have been observing what's occurring in our community, and we find the trends troubling.

COVID-19 cases [continue to rise](#), our [healthcare system](#) is seeing a surge, the [stories](#) of individuals impacted by the pandemic [are heartbreaking](#), and the data continue to suggest [community spread](#) is substantial and increasing.

Our message to our students and their families has stayed the same – **we care about our students and we want to be with them, safely in-person at school, and when that is not possible we are willing to do everything we can to continue to support their growth and learning.**

And we've communicated a consistent message to our community – **educating the students of our community is our job, but doing it during a pandemic is a community effort and we can't do it without everyone in the community doing their part.**

Being a decision-maker right now is a difficult task. The district's leadership is in a tough position, navigating how to provide the best possible learning environment considering all of the factors we are facing. These decisions are made even more difficult due to a lack of timely, consistent data from the McLean County Health Department and harder still recognizing that, regardless of the decision, some of those impacted by the decision – students, families, staff and the community –will be unhappy.

These decisions will not get any easier. But we need the community to collectively take the steps necessary to control community spread and create an environment where returning to school in-person is safe for those of us who work there and the students we care about who learn there.

We Know ...

[Community spread](#) is substantial.

The metrics [Unit 5](#) is monitoring, including those [in McLean County and Illinois](#), are trending in a troubling direction.

The contract tracing data Unit 5 is using seems to indicate the protocols, precautions and procedures in place in our schools are limiting the spread *within* our schools. Yet, despite everything the district has been doing and the fact that exposure and infection seem to be limited within the school setting, community spread continues to rise.

The number of staff and students required to quarantine was growing significantly before we most recently returned to Remote Learning. There are significant staffing issues – [unfilled jobs and insufficient substitutes](#). And we know there would be even more staffing issues if we didn't have current staff pulling double duty and covering classes for each other.

The workload on staff is increasing and the burnout is real. Across the state, [educators are expressing similar concerns](#).

We Don't Know...

An accurate and complete picture of current COVID numbers.

Demand for testing has increased, and many are waiting longer for results. Further, it's our understanding the McLean County Health Department does not have the capacity to provide timely, current data to the district.

The district must rely on data from the Illinois Department of Public Health, which usually runs a week behind. Generally, IDPH data is received by the district each Friday around noon – and that data is from the prior week meaning it's 5-10 days old.

What will happen in the coming weeks.

Despite [recent recommendations from IDPH](#) to work from home when possible, participate only in essential activities, and limit travel and gatherings, it's hard to know what decisions individuals and families will make during Thanksgiving or winter break, and what impact those decisions will have on our schools and the community.

The right answer.

Perhaps the most difficult part of the pandemic is that it's hard to know the right answer. There are benefits and risks regardless of what decision is made. **And those in our community hold a variety of very strong and mixed opinions regarding remote, hybrid and in-person learning.** It likely will not be easy to know what to do until we have more certainty – a consistent and coherent national testing and tracing strategy, trustworthy therapeutics and/or a reliable, readily available vaccine.

We believe...

Every decision the district makes should rely on the best information available and should prioritize the health and safety of staff and students.

The McLean County Board should take whatever steps are necessary to provide the McLean County Health Department with the resources they need to monitor COVID-19 in the community and provide timely, relevant data to decision-makers like Unit 5.

Community leaders should come together to provide common guidance and clear expectations for the community. And those expectations should be enforced.

Staff, students and families should follow the guidance of community leaders and the recommendations of the IDPH, especially in the coming weeks. The only way our schools can remain open safely and consistently for in-person learning is if community spread is reduced and remains at a safe level. We need everyone in the community to wash their hands, watch their distance, wear their masks, stay home whenever they can (and especially if they aren't feeling well) and get tested if they have symptoms or have reason for concern. And everyone needs to limit travel and gatherings.

And everyone, especially elected community leaders like you, should also join us in advocating for a national strategy for dealing with this pandemic and for federal relief for individuals, small businesses and schools – and for communities like ours.

This requires a community effort. **Educating the students of our community is our job, but doing it during a pandemic is a community effort and we can't do it without everyone in the community doing their part.**

We all want to be in our schools with our students, safely. Hybrid and remote learning are not ideal. However, **we must prioritize the health and safety of staff and students. We need the community to collectively take the steps necessary to control community spread and create an environment where returning to school in-person is safe for those of us who work there and the students we care about who learn there.**



Lindsey Dickinson

President

UNIT FIVE EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

ufea.org



Mukta Pradhan

President

UNIT FIVE SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS ASSOCIATION

ufspa.org