



RHODE ISLAND
FEDERATION OF TEACHERS AND
HEALTH PROFESSIONALS ^{AFT}_{AFL - CIO}

January 14, 2021

The Honorable Governor Gina M. Raimondo
State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Lieutenant Governor Daniel McKee
State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Director Nicole Alexander-Scott, MD, MPH
Department of Health
3 Capitol Hill
Providence, RI 02908

Dear Governor Raimondo, Lieutenant Governor McKee, and Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott:

The Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Healthcare Professionals understands the importance of working toward safely returning all of our students, teachers and staff to in-school learning. Education has been painfully disrupted, with teachers, staff and students dealing with the consequences of COVID-19 positive cases and quarantining because of contacts with a confirmed or suspected case.

As we have said for the past several months, returning to in-school learning can only be achieved successfully with the proper resources and precautions to ensure that all classrooms and all those entering school buildings are as safe as possible. The experience of our members teaching and working in person has been, at best, mixed. There is a great deal of fear and mistrust. Staffing issues, class coverage and anxiety resulting from outbreaks is putting further strain on already overtaxed professionals. In addition, confirmation of new strains of the virus which are reportedly more transmissible have added an increased level of anxiety.

If our state is determined to keep schools open, it is absolutely critical that we move educators who are working in our schools into Phase One for vaccination eligibility. They are front line workers, serving RI students and communities, and they and their families deserve our support in being inoculated as soon as possible.

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The RIFTHP is requesting that you direct the state Department of Health to prioritize teachers and school staff to be part of the first phase of vaccinations, as the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended.

As recently as January 11, Rhode Island had the highest per capita rate of COVID-19 cases in the nation and currently remains in the top five states in the country with the highest case rates per capita. Shockingly, our state also recently had the second highest seven-day coronavirus infection rate in the world. If we have any hope of bringing our educational system back to a sense of normality, teachers, teacher assistants, administrators, and school staff, such as custodians, secretaries, aides, and bus drivers – many of whom are now in contact with hundreds of children and other adults every weekday—must be given higher priority for vaccinations. The vaccination schedule for educators should match the list of teachers and school staff who are working in schools.

We commend the effort to expand rapid COVID-19 tests in schools. We hope this will help us identify and address problems more effectively, but that alone is insufficient. Now it is time to follow the example of other states, including Arizona, New Jersey, Michigan, Oklahoma and Utah, which have moved teachers to Phase 1B priority. They are treating their educators—as Rhode Island should—as frontline, essential workers.

If our schools are open, then the state has an obligation to ensure that its educators are safe from contracting COVID-19 and that they can give students the best education possible without disruption due to illness or quarantine. This will require vaccinating our teachers and school employees in the first round of vaccinations. Please leverage any and all resources and influence on the federal government to increase our weekly allocation of vaccines to accomplish this request.

Thank you for considering this as a top priority.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Frank Flynn". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "F".

Frank Flynn

President, Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals