

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

SELECT SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

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Majority (202) 225-5074
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March 28, 2023

Ms. Rochelle Walensky, M.D.
Director
Centers for Disease Control & Prevention
395 E. Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20024

Dear Dr. Walensky:

The Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic is investigating potential political interference at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC). We are aware that the CDC sought input from the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) regarding the CDC's February 12, 2021, COVID-19 school reopening guidance titled, "Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools through Phased Prevention" (Operational Strategy).¹ We are concerned about the potential for undue influence of non-governmental groups on CDC scientific guidance, and therefore, request documents and information on your knowledge of this matter.

The AFT is a political union, not a professional scientific or medical organization. Yet, CDC permitted the AFT to edit the Operational Strategy prior to its release.² The resulting published guidance advised keeping schools closed—contrary to the prevailing science—in greater than 90 percent of U.S. counties.³ The Select Subcommittee's previous investigation into this matter uncovered that CDC deviated from standard practice. You granted AFT "uncommon" access to revise and edit an internal draft of the Operational Strategy at least two weeks prior to its release, even making line-by-line additions.⁴ The AFT's input and access coincidentally shifted CDC's guidance to align with AFT's agenda—keeping schools closed.

The full breadth and scope of the consequences from CDC's decision to prioritize teacher unions over students is still not fully known.⁵ However, there is emerging evidence of substantial

¹ OPERATIONAL STRATEGY FOR K-12 SCHOOLS THROUGH PHASED MITIGATION, U.S. CENTS. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION (Archived Feb. 12, 2021), [<https://web.archive.org/web/20210212214028/https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/community/schools-childcare/K-12-Operational-Strategy-2021-2-12.pdf>].

² Jon Levine, *Powerful teachers union influenced CDC on school reopenings, emails show*, N.Y. POST (May 1, 2021).

³ Apoorva Mandavilli et al., *C.D.C. draws up a blueprint for reopening schools*, THE N. Y. TIMES (Feb. 12, 2021).

⁴ H. COMM. ON OVERSIGHT & REFORM, SELECT SUBCOMM. ON THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS, MINORITY STAFF REPORT, INTERIM FINDINGS: UNION OFFICIALS WROTE KEY PORTIONS OF THE BIDEN ADMIN.'S SCHOOL REOPENING GUIDANCE, 117th Cong. (Mar. 30, 2022).

⁵ Ben Chapman & Douglas Belkin, *Pandemic learning loss could cost students \$70,000 in lifetime earnings*, FOX BUS. (Dec. 27, 2022).

learning loss attributable to pandemic school closures.⁶ According to the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress exam (known as the “Nation’s Report Card”), nine-year-olds lost the equivalent of two decades of educational progress in reading and math during the pandemic.⁷ Students, who attended school mostly online for the 2020-2021 school year, performed 13 percent lower in math and eight percent lower in reading compared to students whose schools met mostly in person.⁸ The 2022 Harvard-Stanford Education Recovery Scorecard predicts that it will take four to five years for students to get back on track to pre-pandemic achievement levels.⁹

Children and teenagers are experiencing a historic mental health crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ Social isolation and academic disruption made it difficult for teachers and child welfare workers to interact with students and recognize signs of child abuse and mental health concerns.¹¹ Reports indicate that depression and anxiety symptoms for children, globally, doubled during the pandemic.¹² Twenty-five percent of youth are experiencing symptoms of depression and 20 percent are experiencing anxiety symptoms.¹³ Suicide is currently the second leading cause of death nationally for children aged 10-14.¹⁴

The prolonged lockdowns and virtual schooling also hurt pediatric physical health. Students’ physical activity declined by 20 percent on average during the lockdowns.¹⁵ This decline is on top of increasing childhood obesity rates in the U.S.¹⁶ This winter, young children experienced unprecedented incidences of respiratory illnesses, such as respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and influenza, due to the isolation from viruses during the pandemic lockdowns.¹⁷

Even as reliable health data became available, instead of prioritizing the health and education of America’s children, the Biden Administration prioritized its political allies. To assist the Select Subcommittee in conducting oversight of political interference at the CDC, we

⁶ Emily Baumgaertner, *Students lost one-third of a school year to pandemic, study finds*, THE N. Y. TIMES (Jan. 30, 2023).

⁷ Sarah Mervosh, *Pandemic learning loss*, THE N. Y. TIMES (Nov. 28, 2022); Donna St. George, *American students’ tests scores plunge to levels unseen for decades*, THE WASH. POST (Sept. 1, 2022).

⁸ Bianca Vazquez Toness & Jocelyn Gecker, *Online schools put US kids behind. Some adults have regrets*, A. P. (Oct. 21, 2022).

⁹ Elizabeth M. Ross, *To get kids back on track after COVID: Shoot for the moon*, HARV. GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUC. (Nov. 17, 2022).

¹⁰ Chia-Yi Hou, *Parents worry about growing post-pandemic youth mental health crisis*, THE HILL (Jan. 25, 2023).

¹¹ Sydney Murphy, *Pandemic showed teachers’ key role in spotting child abuse*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT (Aug. 11, 2022).

¹² PROTECTING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH, THE U.S. SURGEON GEN.’S ADVISORY (2021).

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ FACTS ABOUT SUICIDE, U.S. CENTS. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION, NAT’L CENT. FOR INJURY PREVENTION & CONTROL, <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/facts/> (last accessed Feb. 8, 2023); *Suicide rate is spiking upwards in preadolescent children*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT (Mar. 15, 2022).

¹⁵ Ross Neville et al., *Global changes in child and adolescent physical activity during the COVID-19 pandemic*, JAMA PEDIATRICS (Jul. 11, 2022).

¹⁶ Rachel Fadem, *Rates of childhood obesity have increased, study finds*, CNN (Jul. 7, 2022).

¹⁷ Carla Johnson, *What’s behind worrying RSV surge in US children’s hospitals?* ASSOC. PRESS (Oct. 24, 2022).

Ms. Rochelle Walensky, M.D.

March 28, 2023

Page 3

request the following documents and information as soon as possible, but no later than April 11, 2023:

1. All documents and communications between or among employees of the CDC regarding the preparation, drafting, or publication of the February 12, 2021 guidance entitled “Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools through Phased Prevention.”
2. A complete list of all non-governmental entities or CDC stakeholders that were consulted regarding the Operational Strategy.
3. All drafts of the Operational Strategy including, but not limited to, any draft provided for comment, revision, or consultation to non-federal government entities or CDC stakeholders.
4. All documents and communications between or among employees of the CDC and AFT employees regarding the Operational Strategy.
5. A complete list—including date and full list of attendees—of any meetings— virtual, telephonic, in-person, or otherwise—that included any employee of the CDC, including Director Walensky, and employees of the AFT regarding the Operational Strategy.
6. All documents and communications regarding the planning of, produced in preparation for, or resulting from, any meetings—virtual, telephonic, in-person, or otherwise—that included any employee of the CDC, including Director Walensky, and employees of the AFT Operational Strategy.

In addition to the requested documents, the Select Subcommittee may request employees of your Center sit for transcribed interviews.

The Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic is authorized to investigate “the societal impact of decisions to close schools, how the decisions were made and whether there is evidence of widespread learning loss or other negative effects as a result of these decisions” and “executive branch policies, deliberations, decisions, activities, and internal and external communications related to the coronavirus pandemic” under H. Res. 5.¹⁸

Thank you for your prompt attention to this important matter.

¹⁸ H. Res. 5 § 4(a)(2023).

Ms. Rochelle Walensky, M.D.

March 28, 2023

Page 4

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Brad P. Wenstrup". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Brad Wenstrup, D.P.M.

Chairman

Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic

cc: The Honorable Raul Ruiz, M.D., Ranking Member
Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic