



# Requirements to Safely Create the New Normal for Minnesota's Schools

SEIU Local 284 represents more than 10 thousand education workers across Minnesota. Workers include professors, clerical staff, paraeducators, nutritional services workers, building and grounds workers, early learning staff, custodians and bus drivers. As Governor Walz and his administration plan for the Summer and Fall and consider reopening school districts SEIU Local 284 has a series of demands that will allow us to safely continue our work to support the kids and our communities through the COVID-19 pandemic.

## *Imagine...*

Students in every Minnesota school having all that they need to succeed, from pre-k to career;

A community that recognizes our contribution to education by providing good working conditions and fair wages to all staff;

An economy that fairly rewards everyone's hard work and enables all families to enjoy a good quality of life through their work and retirement years;

**A Union of members powerful enough to make it happen!**

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## **All education workers must be eligible for unemployment in the Summer.**

Public school staff as well as adjunct faculty in the Higher Ed system are not eligible to collect unemployment in the summer so long as they have a "reasonable assurance" of employment in the next school term.

Many school employees don't make enough money at their school jobs and have to work second and third jobs to make ends meet. A lot of those 2nd and 3rd jobs have already laid people off or reduced employees in hours and are unlikely to be back to normal business levels in time for summer employment. This will also impact many school employees who don't work multiple jobs during the school year but need to take on summer jobs to keep their heads above water when they're not working at school.

Thousands of school employees will be sent home at the end of the school year with "reasonable assurance" for the following school year based on Districts leaving staffing levels for the 20-21 school consistent with staffing need decisions pre COVID 19 given the unknown for how education will be provided in the fall. It seems unlikely school will start back in fall with education provided the same as it was pre COVID 19. If this is the case it is important to know that currently many hourly staff are not working their normally assigned hours but, are being kept whole because of the Executive Order. This means, if distance learning continues or some hybrid type of educational system (distance learning and face-to-face) support staff needs will be different than in the past. There will likely be more staffing needs in some areas, screening people entering buildings and more routine environmental cleaning, for example. While in other areas there may be fewer staff needed. In food service for example, cooking is not happening, more items are going out in bulk, not individually dished out and cleaning of thousands of lunch trays is not happening as they are not used for distance learning. If Districts leave staffing consistent for 20-21 with staffing needed pre COVID19 hourly school employees will be ineligible for unemployment benefits during the summer at the same time that it's nearly impossible to find a new job to supplement their income and very likely support staffing needs will change in the fall, the number of staff in a department and number of hours per day

It is blatantly unfair that school districts employees are excluded from MN's unemployment system while resort, golf course, amusement park employees, and private subcontractors doing the same work are eligible. **All non salaried education workers should be eligible for Unemployment Insurance (UI) during the summer. At a minimum, education workers must be eligible for summer UI for the duration of the pandemic.**

### **All school staff must have necessary personal protective equipment.**

We know from our union family in Healthcare that there isn't sufficient Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for people working in hospitals, nursing homes and other healthcare facilities. Before schools are reopened we insist that there be not only sufficient PPE for healthcare workers but that there also be sufficient PPE for school workers. It's worth noting that the guidance around PPE has changed based on scarcity (not science). What constitutes sufficient PPE should be based on science. Caring for students and the community should not come at the cost of our health and the health of our families.

### **Workers and our unions must be included in decisions that impact them.**

Each workplace and community faces unique challenges related to COVID-19. School support staff were deemed "essential employees" during this pandemic yet were not included in decision being made during this pandemic. Going forward these employees who are putting themselves at great risk must be included in decision that impact them. To ensure that reopening plans address those challenges, broad worker and community involvement is necessary. Most school districts have a Labor Management Committee (LMC) but those committees don't include every job class in a district and they often are advisory rather than decision making bodies. Labor must be empowered to make decisions because every worker has a unique insight into the school.

### **We must not try to cut our way out of this crisis.**

Austerity is not the answer to the challenge of COVID-19. For districts that choose to make cuts those cuts need to fall overwhelmingly at the top. Administration and management have grown since 2003 even as the workforce in schools has shrunk. That has led to bloated administrations and overwhelmed workers. Most disturbingly, in community education departments where all the employees have been laid off there has been one position exempt, the community ed director. For districts that embrace austerity it must not be the lowest paid workers who suffer.

### **Concerns by job class.**

**CUSTODIAL.** Since 2010 the number of custodians in Minnesota has been cut in half. Over the same period the buildings have stayed the same. The amount of work custodians were expected to do before the COVID-19 pandemic was already unsustainable. There is no excuse for custodial lay-offs as most buildings have 10 years of deferred maintenance.

**Additional environmental cleaning is going to require additional custodial staff.** Districts across the state have found that it takes about two days to disinfect all the classrooms with the current custodial staff. That's around 30 minutes per person per classroom. This will also have an impact on passing times at the Junior and High Schools since, even if teachers disinfect their own classrooms, there would need to be 30 minutes between classes.

**BUS DRIVERS.** Social distancing on the bus is going to be a significant challenge. It's impossible for the bus driver to sit six feet away from the door, that's just not how busses are designed. Drivers are taping off seats to keep students six feet apart and disinfecting the bus between runs but enforcing social distancing and driving at the same time is not possible. **Lighter loads will require more bus monitors, more busses, more routes and more drivers.**

**FOOD SERVICE.** The COVID-19 crisis has increased the need for free meals during the school year and for the summer meal program. That increased need hasn't been accounted for in school district budgets or planned summer staffing levels. Districts will need additional resources to meet the increased need.

**PARA EDUCATORS.** Distance learning has changed the way that Paras support their students. How that support happens has been dramatically different depending on the district, building, and even teacher.

We know how to support the kids and we should be brought in to develop best practices that can be used across the state to make sure that Paras are employed to support students. Distance Learning has been especially challenging for our students with special education needs. We need to find better ways to support those students.

**CHILDCARE.** School employees have been working to care for the school age children of tier 1 critical sector workers like police, firefighters, nurses, EMTs, and everyone else who wears scrubs to work. We're proud to do our part to support our communities. As our emergency response shifts to become the new normal each community needs to balance the need to provide support to critical workers with the funding challenge that providing that childcare creates for school budgets. School communities and labor unions need to be empowered to chart our path forward.