New Haven Federation of Teachers

An Affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers   **Local 933**   **AFL-CIO**

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Testimony of Leslie Blatteau, President
New Haven Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 933
Informational Hearing on the Continuation of Emergency Declarations
and Limited Executive Orders
Public Health Committee
Tuesday, February 8, 2022

Greetings Senator Abrams, Representative Steinberg, and members of the Public Health Committee. My name is Leslie Blatteau and I am the newly elected President of the New Haven Federation of Teachers. I have also been a member of NHFT Local 933 for fifteen years. I am here to testify against the Governor's decision to reverse the mask mandate in Connecticut's public schools.

First, as we approach the third year of this pandemic, the research has demonstrated the effectiveness of mask policies as a mitigation strategy against COVID-19. In September 2021, the CDC released three studies which found that "school districts without a universal masking policy in place were more likely to have COVID-19 outbreaks. Nationwide, counties without masking requirements saw the number of pediatric COVID-19 cases increase nearly twice as quickly during this same period." If the research is clear, why would the state of Connecticut ignore this and risk the health and safety of school communities in the process?

Second, given the recent surge in COVID cases and the accompanying crisis of understaffing in our school buildings in January, why would we abandon a commonsense measure to help mitigate the spread of the virus? As both a teacher and a union president, I saw firsthand what can happen when staff and students are unable to report to work and school because of required isolation and quarantine. Teachers and support staff, already experiencing unprecedented levels of stress and frustration, had to do their own job and the job of their colleagues, who were out sick. And students missed out on lessons, class discussions, and important interventions because they too were impacted by the ongoing spread of the virus. We already know that schools are often crowded spaces without adequate ventilations systems. Why not maintain the mask mandate to ensure we continue to move in the right direction with respect to case numbers and

hospitalization rates in our state? As I say to my high school students, some of whom are sometimes reluctant to keep their masks on, "Keeping our masks on helps to keep us safe, healthy, and in school. I care about you. Let's keep our masks on."

Lastly, I urge this committee to consider other options. Rather than rolling back the mask mandate, why not expand the Covid Relief Fund to help more Connecticut workers get compensated for their COVID related sick time? We should expand the application window for all cases to June 30, 2022, to protect workers and our workplaces. Rather than rolling back the mask mandate, why not ensure that every staff member in our state's public schools have access to fitted KN95 masks to help protect both them and their students? Rather than rolling back the mask mandate, why not recognize the tremendous stress educators and students are experiencing right now and respond proactively to support them? We need relief not from a mask mandate, but from the relentless demand for student performance data when so much other available data exists and could inform our next steps. There is a direct connection between our students' emotional well being and the continued push for data collection, progress monitoring, and standardized testing. Educators and our students were not given nearly enough time and support to come back to school and reconnect on a human level and it is showing in our culture, climate, and morale. After what so many of us have been through, we need evidence-based strategies so we can remain healthy and engaged between now and the end of the school year. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer questions as needed.