COVID-19 has presented unparalleled challenges to the inherent interconnectedness of our daily lives. As educators, we have widened our focus to include how best to ensure our children are educated safely during these unprecedented and unpredictable times. No one wants to be in our schools more than educators and educational support professionals. Interacting with students is what we love to do. Therefore, the safety of everyone involved in educating our children is at the forefront of our thought processes at this time.

Our members are rightly concerned about their personal health and that of their loved ones. They are concerned about entering buildings, school buses, and other environments that may not follow CDC (Center for Disease Control) recommended guidelines for safety. The Georgia Association of Educators (GAE) affirms that educators and educational support professionals should not be required to return to work if they do not feel the school environment is safe for them or their students. While educating our children is the purpose of school districts, this purpose should not override the health of educators, their loved ones, or students and their families. Districts should refrain from coercing educators to make a choice between safety and health versus virtual learning.

Thus, GAE believes that virtual learning is the safest instructional option until a vaccine for Covid-19 is developed and administered. This option, however, has drawbacks. Factors such as lack of reliable internet accessibility and limited access to devices (laptops) across the state and within specific households impact how instruction may or may not take place. The pandemic has further highlighted the systemic policy impediments to learning that exist in our underserved communities that we must begin to address. Despite these challenges, erring on the side of safety is paramount to the health and welfare of all involved.
Despite GAE’s recommendation centering on virtual learning, if school systems decide to move forward with in-person instruction, GAE is advising its members to do the following immediately:

- Contact their local superintendents and school boards to ensure the voices of teachers and educational support professionals (such as school bus drivers, cafeteria workers, custodians, and secretaries) and parents—all taxpayers, citizens, and registered voters—are involved in the decision-making processes on the opening of their local schools. Having local school officials not only hear concerns over these instructional issues but also recognize the reality that students may not adhere to social distancing during hallway passing, restroom usage, cafeteria time, and school bus seating is vital. Students may also struggle with the proper use and maintenance of face mask and disinfection protocols. Call for the district’s plan to address these issues.

- Ask local officials to base their in-school decisions on the latest available infection data from the Georgia Department of Public Health for their area. Visit: https://dph.georgia.gov/covid-19-daily-status-report

- Ask whether their district is instituting known best practices under the latest up-to-date guidelines for reopening schools from the CDC (Considerations for Schools). Visit: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/schools.html. Ask whether masks and other PPE will be consistently provided for all students and employees along with the necessary sanitizers and cleaning materials. Will class sizes be adjusted accordingly? Will temperatures be taken before and during the school day and include those children taking the bus? What is the protocol when someone has a fever or other symptoms of COVID-19?

- Ask for clearly established and published protocols to be followed when someone tests positive for COVID-19.

- Ask what the plan is if many parents simply choose not to send their children to school.

Please note:

Members who do not feel safe with current school-district plans to reopen for in-person instruction should make their concerns known in writing to their school principal or supervisor immediately. Members should NOT sign a waiver absolving the district of liability should they fall ill from Covid-19.

Questions or concerns? Contact your UniServ Director or the GAE Advocacy and Training Center (678.837.1100).