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| Dear Colleagues,The pandemic continues to present challenges for all Americans. With a new, highly transmissible COVID-19 variant surging, educators, nurses, healthcare professionals and public employees remain on the frontlines of keeping communities safe and operating. And while the Biden administration has offered a great deal of assistance, we are disappointed in its failure to extend the Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s emergency temporary standard; in response, we filed a lawsuit this week to keep it in place. We also find the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s constant changing of guidance confusing; in response, we have attached a summary of the current CDC guidance on isolation, quarantining and testing in an effort to clarify it.People are eager to get back to their normal lives—for schools to remain open, for hospitals to return to normal patient levels, and for our economy to continue to recover. Since the beginning of the pandemic, our union’s North Star has been how to accomplish those goals safely while limiting the spread of COVID-19. We know in-person schooling is what’s best for students academically, and for their mental health. And while we are working hard throughout the country to keep schools open, the reality of omicron is that it spreads quickly, and we’re likely to see some temporary reactive closures in the coming weeks, both because of infection rates and staff shortages. This makes regular testing—including a test to leave isolation—as well as well-fitting masks, ventilation and, of course, vaccines and boosters all the more important to keep the entire education community safe.Despite the omicron surge, the tracking service reports that 95 percent of our country’s public schools are open. But we are facing incredible staff shortages—teachers, cafeteria workers, bus drivers and others—as the virus spreads and adults are forced to isolate and miss work. We see similar shortages across the airline industry as well as other businesses. We suspect that these shortages may result in additional reactive closures, and we are committed to doing everything possible to make those closures short and temporary, including being ready with a variety of remote learning options, rigorous testing protocols, and transparency about infections. Again, our ultimate goal remains to keep things open safely whenever and wherever possible.In many cases, we do in fact have the tools to keep our schools open and to meet the educational needs of students in a safe environment. Through rigorous testing, the wearing of well-fitted N95 and KN95 respirator masks, and requiring a negative test to stay in school *and* to end isolation, we can stay safe. That said, we need more school districts to step up to the challenge and provide adequate testing.Public health officials believe that the omicron variant will peak in the U.S. within the next several weeks. This week, in addition to the crisis in Chicago, we saw staffing shortages in schools and other parts of the economy. Those shortages, and the lack of testing and other mitigation, resulted in delayed reopening and temporary closures of many schools. At the same time, we are seeing good practices around testing being exercised in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles and New York City. And while many hospitals are again filling up—and our healthcare members are exhausted and nearing the breaking point—the patients they are treating are largely unvaccinated.Even with these realities in mind, we remain hopeful. As I conveyed to our leadership before Christmas, I have been in contact with medical experts in South Africa who suggest that, similar to what we see happening here, omicron, while highly infectious for those who have not been fully vaccinated and boosted, is less severe and does not result in the same rate of hospitalization and, thankfully, in the same rate of death as other variants.In light of the ever changing nature of the pandemic and the changes in guidance, we have scheduled a virtual town hall on Tuesday, Jan. 11, at 6:45 p.m. (Eastern time) to discuss COVID-19 and the omicron variant. Our guests will be U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy; Dr. Irwin Redlener, pediatrician and co-founder of the Children’s Health Fund; and Dr. Vin Gupta, pulmonologist, and faculty member at the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation. Please tune into the livestream on AFT’s Facebook page.[Please find a summary of the current CDC guidance on isolation](https://u1584542.ct.sendgrid.net/ss/c/atcYNHk4Eh2YdGnwBh-YDDTOVcPn2rDXWcw5mdKuH-rAQ53eimzTGYA2Qe4yj5tDBQmcOlw4llBmwVQUzJzH8mozWm1u0-Dzv7KM8_HabVwKSAIqgW5ker-WO2gFXvE2/3ij/g5kil74rRhCONXcJvryycA/h0/5msUf0Ovv3CIqdJtEYhcOOqgd1uBWzCDvz1h-4fxEpk), quarantine and testing, as it applies to healthcare, schools and the general public.In unity,Randi WeingartenAFT President |