Coronavirus-exposed teachers could stay in classrooms under new fed. guidance

Enlarge / Teacher in school classroom.

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An updated guidance document from the Trump Administration now designates teachers and school staff as “essential critical infrastructure” workers, which would allow them to remain in classrooms and schools after being exposed to the pandemic coronavirus, rather than going into quarantine.

The guidance is not a directive—school districts can still decline to include educators in the designation. But some school districts have already made the designation and have signaled that they will keep teachers out of quarantines after exposures, as long as they remain symptom free. That includes school districts in Tennessee and Georgia, according to a report by the Associated Press.

Keeping exposed teachers in schools raises the risks that they could spread the infection to students and coworkers while showing no symptoms. Studies so far have suggested that infected people may be most infectious around the time they first develop symptoms. Researches have repeatedly found that levels of viral material in the upper respiratory tract are at their highest right around the time when people first notice symptoms. Additionally, some infected people do not develop symptoms but can still harbor similar levels of the virus as symptomatic people, according to several studies.

The possibility of exposed teachers staying in classrooms is already alarming teachers’ associations and school administrators. Their concern is likely heightened by a rash of recent reports of schools and colleges that reopened amid the pandemic, only to abruptly close after quickly finding clusters of cases and widespread exposures.

Still, at least six school districts in Tennessee have already adopted the designation for their educators, as has one school district in Georgia, located in suburban Atlanta’s Forsyth County.

Craig Harper, director of the Professional Association of

Georgia Educators, spoke with the Associated Press and called the designation “reckless.” He also noted that it “starkly contradicts the newest Georgia Department of Public Health guidance.”

Dicey advice

The guidance document at the center of the issue is one published by the Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency, CISA, and titled “Guidance on the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce: Ensuring Community and National Resilience in COVID-19 Response.” According to the CISA, the guidance aims to “help officials and organizations identify essential work functions in order to allow them access to their workplaces during times of community restrictions.”

The guidance was originally issued March 19 and in past versions has identified essential workers in sectors including healthcare, law enforcement, food and agriculture, energy, transportation, water and wastewater, public works, and communication and information technology.

But the fourth and latest version of the guidance, issued August 18, now includes workers in the education sector, including teachers and professors, school administrators and staff, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and school safety personnel.

Under separate guidance issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, such “critical infrastructure workers may be permitted to continue work following potential exposure to COVID-19, provided they remain asymptomatic and additional precautions are implemented to protect them and the community.” This, according to the guidance, is to “ensure continuity of operations of essential function.”

In a statement to the AP, American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten rebuked the federal guidances,

saying, “If the president really saw us as essential, he’d act like it.” “Teachers are and always have been essential workers—but not essential enough, it seems, for the Trump administration to commit the resources necessary to keep them safe in the classroom.”

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