

HOFFMAN 'NOT OPTIMISTIC' SCHOOLS WILL BE READY FOR AUG. 17 IN-PERSON REOPENING



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Arizona Schools Superintendent Kathy Hoffman said Wednesday that the already delayed Aug. 17 start of in-person classes may have to be pushed back again in light of continuing concerns about COVID-19 safety.

Hoffman, during a conference call to criticize a White House push for reopening schools, said she and Gov. Doug Ducey are re-evaluating that date, which [was announced](#) by Ducey in an executive order two weeks ago.

"At this time, I am not optimistic that Arizona will be ready to open for in-person instruction on Aug. 17," Hoffman said. "I would predict that we will have announcements regarding that in the near future, but that has not yet been decided."

[Ducey spoke](#) with superintendents from around the state Wednesday, but his office did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Hoffman's comments came during a call in which state Democrats pushed back against the White House, which is leading the charge in favor of reopening schools. They said that push comes with little guidance and "lacks empathy for our educators" at a time of spiraling COVID-19 cases.

It also comes one day before Education Secretary Betsy DeVos is expected to take part in a [virtual conversation](#) with the Southern Arizona chapter of the Federalist Society, a group that works to put conservative judges on the bench. DeVos has been holding almost daily conversations with Federalist Society chapters in recent weeks to discuss changes to Title IX, the law prohibiting gender-based discrimination in schools.

2019 Arizona Teacher of the Year Kareem Neal, who was on the call Wednesday, said DeVos' visit with a group of lawyers instead of parents or school workers is "a slap in the face."

"It's a scary thought to know you never have a seat at the table with this administration," said Neal, who teaches in a special education classroom in Maryvale.

He and others on the call said DeVos' department and the White House have yet to give guidelines for reopening schools but continues to push the need for kids to be back in school, a rush to reopen they called "reckless" and "completely out-of-touch with reality."

Hoffman, a Democrat, said she is grateful she and the Republican governor can work together, and that the decision for a reopening date will be heavily reliant on data from the Arizona Department of Health Services.

"It's clear that right now it is not safe to do so and a reckless attempt to do so without grounding those decisions in data will put the lives of our educators and students at risk," Hoffman said. "Trump's push to reopen schools is completely out-of-touch with reality here on the ground in Arizona."

In broadcast interviews with [Fox News](#) and [CNN](#) this past week, DeVos repeated the administration's plea that "kids need to be back in school full-time." That echoes statements from President Donald Trump, who began the push for on-campus classes last week with an [urgent tweet](#): "SCHOOLS MUST OPEN IN THE FALL!!!"

The Education Department has not released guidelines to reopen schools, pointing instead to guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which educators say are nearly impossible to follow.

"There is no one, uniform approach that we can, or should, take nationwide," DeVos said in a Sunday interview with CNN. "I am urging all schools to be open and to be providing their students a full-time education."

The Education Department did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Rep. Andy Biggs, R-Gilbert, joined the White House's push [last week, saying](#) at a House Freedom Caucus briefing last week that "it would be more harmful to keep children locked out of schools."

All four of the speakers on the call agreed with statements from DeVos and Biggs that children learn better and do better in-person, but questions on how to do that safely have not been answered. Arizona Education Association President Joe Thomas said he is "frustrated" by the lack of guidance.

"No one wants to be back in school more than educators, but we have no plan and no leadership at either the federal level from President Trump or at the state level from Gov. Ducey," said Thomas, who teaches social studies in Mesa. "This has led to significant anxiety among educators."

"It didn't have to be this way," Thomas said.