

# CSEA Safe@School

## Protecting Our School Communities

CSEA, The Civil Service Employees Association represents over 134 School Districts in urban, suburban, and rural New York State and over 500 bargaining units within those districts. CSEA members are a critical but often overlooked part of the school community as aides, monitors, assistants, custodians, bus drivers, security, nurses, counselors, maintenance, grounds keepers, food service and clerical staff. They care deeply not only for the safety of their co-workers but for the safety and health of the students they guide and protect daily.

### State of Preparedness in 2020

Schools in New York were not prepared for most emergencies, let alone how to safely operate during a pandemic. An audit from 2017-2019 of NY school districts by the Comptroller concluded that none of the required safety plans under the SAVE Act met **all** the minimum requirements and no schools met all of the annual safety training requirements under NYS Education Law.<sup>i</sup> These training requirements reviewed did not account for emergency action planning required for workers by OSHA/PESH. The report also uncovered a lack of staffing for enforcement of State Education requirements.

**PROUD SCHOOL  
WORKER**



**CSEA members make  
our schools safe!**

**CSEA** Safe@School  
Protecting Our School Communities  
<https://cseany.org/school-safety>

On March 16, 2020 all K-12 Schools were ordered to close for at least a month, which lasted for the remaining school year. School workers were still tasked with keeping the buildings open, running day cares, and providing lunches to students in need without pandemic plans. While some districts complied quickly with recommended precautions, some CSEA members turned to their union's Occupational Safety and Health Department for assistance to postpone operations until infection control measures could be implemented to ensure safe and healthy environments for the school community.

*"We never left [the school buildings]. As custodians, we can't virtually fix a pipe. We can't virtually paint. Our district has been good about keeping us informed and getting us our PPE. It's important to remember that for many of us, we never left and we've been here getting the job done."* — **Tim Khuns, president, Peekskill City School District Unit**

July of 2020 came in with a great deal of anxiety and confusion about the coming school year and reopening schools for in-person learning. On July 18, The NYS Education Department released a 145-page reopening guidance document. CSEA members needed summaries, clarity and best practices in infection control applied to this document, so the CSEA Occupational Safety and Health Department created a training specifically to assist school communities to easily navigate the guidelines and to build safety programs and protocols. There was little time to waste as most schools were scheduled to open September 14, 2020 which gave them a short time, to understand, purchase, implement and train on new control methods.

CSEA leaders and safety and health activists that comprise the Standing Safety and Health Committee recognized the critical need for safety education and awareness around school related issues and collaborated with CSEA's leaders and school activists on the Special Committee for Local Government Schools. Together with assistance from the Occupational Safety and Health and Communication Departments, the Safe@School campaign was created. The campaign's goal is to create educational resources to assist CSEA members to bring solutions in advocating for the best possible infection control and workplace safety measures. The campaign also seeks to provide education and awareness to the school community at large partnering with teachers, parents, and administrators. These goals would be carried out through a series of trainings and an outreach

# CSEA Safe@School

## Protecting Our School Communities

campaign with the use of a new webpage and social media content. Drive through information days were accomplished in all 6 CSEA Regions where leadership and members from schools could drive through and receive information to distribute to their members without getting out of their cars. The information included fact sheets on a variety of related hazards, magnets which were created to remind parents of symptom screening they should perform prior to their children boarding buses, lanyards with hand sanitizer and the QR code to the website, hazard communication information cards and phone numbers to call for information and referrals. Over 30,000 materials were distributed.

*"Providing our school workers with the most accurate and up-to-date information as they look at reopening is our major concern. Combining the efforts of our statewide Safety and Health Committee with our schools is a terrific way to use the knowledge that all these members bring to the table. By joining forces, we should be able to identify health and safety issues that are of utmost concern and provide some guidance and information to them as they go back to work in uneasy times."*

- John Brown, chair of CSEA's Special Local Government Schools Committee.



### Training Courses

Utilizing the resources CSEA was awarded from the NIEHS Worker Training Program under the Hazard Disaster Preparedness Training Program and a CoVID-19 supplemental grant, an aggressive training schedule was created to address pandemic and other related hazards for a variety of school related CSEA member titles. As the grant year began August 1, of 2020, training began August 5<sup>th</sup>. Each course ran 2-3 times live, then were available on demand through May 31, 2021. **22 sessions were dedicated to K-12 schools training.** 6 new trainings were developed specifically for that project and three were modified and carried over from the previous grant year. **1,541 workers participated.** The K-12 schools training topics were:

- Bus Safety and Health for Transportation Workers
- Cleaning After CoVID-19- The Schools Edition
- Health and Safety Considerations for Reopening Schools
- Returning Safely to Work
- Safety and Health for Monitors, Aides, Assistants and Clerical Staff
- Union Enforcement and Action
- Using Ventilation to Protect the School Community (Created in conjunction with NYSUT)
- Ventilation for the Heating Season

These courses, each with its own focus, addressed not only New York State Education pandemic regulations and guidance but also included applicable OSHA/PESH regulations, best practices and information on pandemic related hazards and needs such as workplace violence prevention, mental health resources and considerations for working with special needs students. The courses were open to anyone concerned about the school community, not just CSEA members.

*"I thought this webinar was great. Very informative to a Teaching Assistant who will be working in a Special Education Classroom."* **Carla Desiderio, Teaching Assistant, Springs UFSD**

*"The information presented was clear and useful and was relevant to the situations we face in NY schools at the moment. Thank you for addressing our questions and concerns. Please continue offering these types of informational webinars."*  
**Andrea Miranda, Spanish Teacher, Clarkstown CSD**



# Safe@School

## Protecting Our School Communities

### Demographics of K-12 Schools Training Participants

#### Gender of Course Participants

Female	Male	Total
1219	322	1541

#### Race/Ethnicity of Course Participants

African American	Hispanic/Latinx	Native American	Asian	Biracial/multi-racial	Pacific Islander	Caucasian/White	Other or Unknown	Total
149	77	1	19	6	1	1265	23	1541

#### Work Categories

State	17
County	18
City/Municipal	3
College/University	16
K-12 Schools	1,426
Water/Wastewater Authority	0
Private Sector	61
Other/Unknown	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1541</b>

#### Types of Work

Administrative/Clerical	122
Childcare	7
Custodial/Janitorial	91
Emergency Services	0
Food Service	12
Healthcare	15
Information Technology	4
Maintenance	30
Parks and Recreation	0
Road/Bridge Work	2
Safety	14
Sanitation	0
School Aide/Assistant	651
Security/Police/Fire	11
Social Services	4
Transportation	120
Union	13
Water/Wastewater	0
Other/Unknown (Mostly Teachers)	445
<b>Total</b>	<b>1541</b>

### Impact Survey Results

Post-Training, CSEA completed the development of a survey instrument for local/unit union presidents of K-12 bargaining units to assess the impact of safety and health training provided under the HDPTP grant. Impacts were assessed not only for school employees but their communities as well. With a very high response rate (N=52), the results indicated a high rate of literacy among respondents. One example of impact was the high percentage (75%) of local union presidents who have attained district pandemic plans.

#### In addition:

- 71.2% were included in safety and health discussions in their local school districts.
- 44.2% have a local union safety and health committee.
- 65.4% were willing to request injury and illness logs.
- 69.2% engaged with the school community to demonstrate the workers' concerns over COVID-19.
- 90.4% were involved in ongoing safety and health discussion with their local school district.
- 30.8% got Right-to-Know plans updated.
- 36.5% updated screening processes.
- 46.2% updated visitation policies.
- 48.1% upgraded ventilation filtration.
- 46.2% reduced bus densities.



# Safe@School

## Protecting Our School Communities

- 53.8% reduced classroom density.
- 44.2% had N-95 respirators to staff beyond nurses.
- 38.5% provided physical distancing in lunchrooms.
- 48.1% provided polycarbonate barriers.
- 23.1% delayed their start date to implement and train staff on control measures.
- 46.2% provided other required trainings.
- 51.9% set up isolation rooms with proper PPE.
- 38.5% addressed issues with isolation areas.
- 21.2% kept hatches and windows open on buses.
- 28.8% procured disinfection misters for buses and tight spaces.
- 40.4% procured training on new disinfectants and equipment.
- 46.2 implemented hallway planning and marking for distancing.

### Survey Demographics

#### Gender of Course Participants

Female	Male	Total
31	21	52

#### Race/Ethnicity of Course Participants

African American	Hispanic/Latinx	Native American	Asian	Biracial/multi-racial	Pacific Islander	Caucasian/White	Other or Unknown	Total
1	2	1	0	0	0	44	4	52

#### Work Categories

State	0
County	0
City/Municipal	0
College/University	0
K-12 Schools	52
Water/Wastewater Authority	0
Private Sector	0
Other/Unknown	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>

#### Types of Work

Administrative/Clerical	18
Childcare	0
Custodial/Janitorial	9
Emergency Services	0
Food Service	1
Healthcare	2
Information Technology	0
Maintenance	0
Parks and Recreation	0
Road/Bridge Work	0
Safety	0
Sanitation	0
School Aide/Assistant	6
Security/Police/Fire	1
Social Services	0
Transportation	4
Union	0
Water/Wastewater	0
Other/Unknown	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>



## Other Key Impacts

### Ventilation and Air Filtration

As studies continue to show that ventilation and air filtration<sup>ii</sup> is a key component to combatting CoVID-19, CSEA partnered with NYSUT to create a program on protecting the school community through ventilation and air filtration<sup>iii</sup>. **This course had the most attendance (738 participants) and had a positive impact on school infrastructure as the survey shows that 48.1% upgraded ventilation filtration.** The need for such infrastructure upgrades were highlighted in the 2021 Infrastructure Report Card by the American Society of Civil Engineers which determined that 53% of public-school districts report the need to update or replace multiple building systems including HVAC systems.<sup>iv</sup> Even though many systems were upgraded, several still need upgrades to utilize filtration systems with the ability to combat CoVID-19. CSEA's training increased literacy and awareness around a topic so few previously knew about.

*"My biggest concern is air filtration and the ventilation system. Our school is very old, and due to the age of our infrastructure, could only get a MERV 11 filtration system instead of the [recommended]MERV 13 system.*

— Rosemary DeVito, president, Edgemont School District Unit

### Pandemic Plans

Since the start of the Safe@Schools campaign, the CSEA Occupational Safety and Health Department **has worked with 372 of its K-12 school bargaining units** to resolve issues and provide pandemic and preparedness guidance. As all schools were required to create continuity of operations plans for future pandemics to avoid the confusion of 2020, CSEA leaders and staff actively worked with administrations and commented on plans.

### Addressing Vulnerable Populations

Special attention was given to issues when caring for special needs students during emergencies. Lack of funding and attention are common, leaving both the needs of students and their caregivers unaddressed<sup>v</sup>. In the Safety and Health for Monitors, Aides, Assistants and Clerical Staff training, CSEA addressed planning and requirements for long-term and short-term disabilities, language barriers, the hearing and/or visually impaired, cognitive and emotional needs, medication issues and mental/behavioral needs. The training also discussed strategies for Individualized Education Programs, other helpful resources such as go bags, sensory stimulation implements, emergency training and establishing relationships with local responders.

The impact survey also revealed that as a result of this training:

- 26.9 addressed emergency planning for special needs students.
- 19.2% increased communication regarding Individualized Education Plans.



## **The Importance of Union/Worker Involvement and Resources in Emergencies**

### **The Impact of NIEHS Grant on a Bus Driver and Her Members**

**Sue Spain, Unit President, Ballston Spa Central School District, Ballston Spa, New York**

#### **Background**

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, there was much confusion and anxiety about safety. CSEA, as part of The New England Consortium, under a grant from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) Worker Education Training Program, created webinars and materials for their members. What role did these resources play in teaching a bus driver and her members about precautions from COVID?

#### **Confusion At the Start of COVID**

Sue Spain, a driver for the Ballston Spa Central School District and Unit President 8455, Ballston Spa Central School District, is also a Certified Examiner through the State of New York and knows as much as anyone about what it takes to be a driver. She's been a member of and now Vice President of the Saratoga County Labor Council. She has faced multiple dilemmas fighting for the 250 members she represents. Having attended a training on tackling issues in the workplace a few years earlier, Sue and the other officers of her local had organized a Safety and Health Committee in their workplace.

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic the challenges intensified. Yet, through perseverance and resources provided by the Union's OSH Department under the NIEHS Worker Education Training Program, she prevailed. She remembers what it was like those first few days of the pandemic:

“On March 13, 2020, we were all released from the school. On March 21, two days later, CSEA had a webinar, “Cleaning After COVID” so of course I grabbed that resource and I watched the entire webinar, which was awesome. I send my members to it all the time. It was just a wonderful resource and it helped me tremendously. I had put down in my notes that I had key points because I knew this school district did not have anything in place.

#### **Reaching Out for Resources**

She reached out to two of her union's Occupational Safety and Health staff, along with the local Labor Council. She also contacted her CSEA Labor Relations Specialist on a daily basis. She also contacted her CSEA local and regional Presidents. Sue and several other members of her unit attended all of the schools and COVID-19 related training that CSEA offered.

From the OSH training, Sue learned the following must be in place prior to opening:

- Conducting PPE hazard assessment
- Following CDC guidelines
- Taking temperatures before entering
- Setting up testing areas
- Purchasing full gowns and goggles
- Creating three isolation areas
- Rotating staff



- Maintenance of an exposure room
- Scheduling nurses on staff to monitor students
- Conducting cleaning between any exposures

### **Ensuring that the Cleaning Supplies Are Safe**

From there she became concerned about the workers who were charged with cleaning the schools. The cleaners were sent home for one week but were then asked to come in right away to start cleaning. Her employer was interested in using the Ballston Area Community Center to accommodate the students. Sue became concerned and wanted to ensure that the following safety and health precautions were put in place:

- Safety and health training for all staff involved
- Proper PPE for all staff
- Cleaning supplies that would not cause any illnesses

She set up a meeting with her CSEA OSH representative and Labor Relations Specialist along with the head of facilities and his supervisor to prepare their workplace for CoVID precautions. Having everybody in the same room, she made sure the cleaners had all they needed:

“I wanted to make sure they included if someone had CoVID in a room and how to keep it closed for 24 hours, how to take their gloves off, and to make sure that every person got trained. I got them all to take the OSH webinar and they learned a lot from it.”

### **How They Were Affected by COVID**

In June of 2020, her members were still terrified about their jobs, their paychecks, even their ability to put food on their families' tables. She learned that the school district wants to bus students to private schools. In addition to teaching management what they needed to do to keep her members safe, she had to teach her own members and supervisors about the need for PPE. She bought all of her members masks and gloves, showed them how to clean their buses, open the windows, drop down their roof hatches, wash their hands, and throw their gloves out properly.

Many of her members are parents of special needs students, so they were terrified.

“Number 1, they were worried about bringing their kids back. Number 2, about having to go back to work. Most of them were grateful every day. Some had to go back in June including the drivers, the secretaries, and the cleaners. In August, I knew school was coming and I get an email saying they want to put 25 kids in a school bus. I said, ‘no.’ I went in with all of our Union’s suggestions. If you have siblings, they can sit together, but other than that, they need to skip a seat. Then we worked with the cleaners to come in with a spray gun to get better cleaning supplies. They had given us chlorine tabs and one of the drivers got sick from it. And we had to get them to find new chemicals that were safer for the cleaners.”

### **Keeping the Drivers Safe**

She and many of her members attended a bus safety webinar that the OSH Department held and worked with her OSH Specialist to put safer systems in place on the School District’s buses:



- Students could only sit six feet apart
- Students could only sit one per seat
- Roof hatches had to remain open for ventilation

Sue said: “I think that the PPE and distancing in the classrooms and buses were found to be very effective and helpful and that was the result of the training we got from CSEA Occupational Safety and Health Department.”

### **Utilizing Her Resources**

Sue’s the kind of person who can handle emergencies well. She does her research. She enlists allies. She works with her union. But after it’s over, she, like many of us, starts to wonder what she could have done better. She thinks of her resources. Allyzibeth A. Lamont, 22 years old, worked in a sub shop in Gloversville, was murdered by her employer and a manager as a result of her citing them for wage theft<sup>vi</sup>. Sue explains:

“The owner of the sub shop was withholding wages. He was holding back wages and paying them ‘under the table.’ Allyzibeth, being a strong young lady, called the Labor Department on them. After she did that, they killed her. Why do I bring this up? I had all these resources. I had a Union behind me. If that girl had a Union, she’d be alive today. She did this out of her own strength, on her own. I got fired from two jobs for trying to start a union. But that didn’t cost my life. And I don’t ever want to take for granted what I have in this Union. And I don’t want my membership to either.”

### **Learnings for the Future**

Sue is proud of her inner strength. She gives thanks to the Union. She gives thanks to her Dad, who was a labor activist. When she was small, she saw injustices around her. From these experiences, Sue explains what she’s learned:

“I learned never to doubt yourself. When you know in your gut something feels wrong, no matter how hard people try to push you away from it, try to take you down, try to make you look bad. You keep going, hold your head up high and know you’re doing the right thing.”

Through perseverance and use of good educational resources, these workers were protected from potential harm throughout the pandemic.

### **Final Summary**

CSEA’s Safe@School campaign had a profound effect on the safety and health of K-12 workers and their school communities. Due to positive changes made in the School Districts, many of the adverse effects were mitigated. Because of these efforts’ workers, students, family members, and community members remained healthy. CSEA utilized well the funding and resources provided by the NIEHS WTP and the union saved the lives of not only thousands of its members but those in the greater school communities.

*“There are so many questions about safely returning to school, whether online or virtual, that we saw a need to develop a specialized resource area just for the members who keep our schools running. Our goal is to protect them as well as the entire school community they support. Utilizing the professional staff in our Occupational Safety and Health Department, we’ve pulled together some great resources to answer their questions and provide the protection they need and deserve.”* - CSEA President Mary E. Sullivan





CSEA, AFSCME Local 1000 is the largest affiliate of the American Federation for State, County and Municipal Employees and a member of The New England-CSEA Consortium. They represent 300,000 active members and retirees from New York State, County, Municipal and the Private Sector.

## Sources

---

<sup>i</sup> DiNapoli, Thomas P. New York State Comptroller New York State School Safety, A Statewide and Regional Review, August 2019 <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/files/local-government/publications/pdf/nys-school-safety-statewide-regional-review.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Schoen, Lawrence J. P.E. Guidance for Building Operations During the CoVID-19 Pandemic; ASHRAE Journal May 2020 [https://www.ashrae.org/file%20library/technical%20resources/ashrae%20journal/2020journaldocuments/72-74\\_ieq\\_schoen.pdf](https://www.ashrae.org/file%20library/technical%20resources/ashrae%20journal/2020journaldocuments/72-74_ieq_schoen.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> Lindsley WG, Derk RC, Coyle JP, et al. Efficacy of Portable Air Cleaners and Masking for Reducing Indoor Exposure to Simulated Exhaled SARS-CoV-2 Aerosols — United States, 2021. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep. ePub: 2 July 2021. DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7027e1external\\_icon](http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7027e1external_icon).

<sup>iv</sup> American Society of Civil Engineers, 2021 Report Card for America's Infrastructure Schools Report, 2021 [https://infrastructurereportcard.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/National\\_IRC\\_2021-report.pdf](https://infrastructurereportcard.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/National_IRC_2021-report.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> National Council on Disability, IDEA Series, BrokenPromises: The Underfunding of IDEA, February 7, 2018 [https://ncd.gov/sites/default/files/NCD\\_BrokenPromises\\_508.pdf](https://ncd.gov/sites/default/files/NCD_BrokenPromises_508.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> Colarossi, Natalie, Sub Shop Owner Killed Woman Over Back Pay, Prosecutors Say: 'He Had to Take Her Out', Newsweek, May 11, 2021 <https://www.newsweek.com/sub-shop-owner-killed-woman-over-back-pay-prosecutors-say-he-had-take-her-out-1590621>