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**The Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions — “COVID-19: Safely Getting Back to Work and Back to School”**

On Tuesday, May 12th, from 10:00 AM- 2 PM ET, the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions held a hearing titled “[COVID-19: Safely Getting Back to Work and Back to School.”](https://www.help.senate.gov/hearings/covid-19-safely-getting-back-to-work-and-back-to-school) The panel featured [Dr. Anthony S. Fauci](https://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/HHS%20Testimony1.pdf) (Director of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases, National Institutes of Health), [Dr. Stephen M. Hahn](https://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/HHS%20Testimony1.pdf) (Commissioner of Food and Drugs, Food and Drug Administration), [Admiral Brett Giroir, M.D.](https://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/HHS%20Testimony1.pdf) (Assistant Secretary for Health, Department of Health and Human Services) and [Dr. Robert Redfield](https://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/HHS%20Testimony1.pdf) (Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN) opened the Senate hearing stating that the nation’s testing of 9 million people is “impressive, but not nearly enough.” Chairman Alexander added that more widespread testing that brings faster results, probably through new technologies, would be needed before schools could reopen in the fall. “All roads back to work and back school lead through testing, tracking, isolation, treatment, and vaccines.” Chairman Alexander said. In her opening statement, Ranking Member Patty Murray (D-WA) accused President Trump of lying and calling the administration’s response a disaster that’s been hampered by corruption and political interference. “Trump has been more focused on fighting against the truth than fighting the virus,” she said. Ranking Member Murry added that the U.S. is nowhere close to where it needs to be to reopen safely. She called it unacceptable that there’s no national plan for testing to be free, fast, and available everywhere.

Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN) questioned Dr. Fauci about the prospect for students and faculty around the country hoping for a fall return. Dr. Fauci reiterated that no vaccine is likely in that time frame and a possible treatment has only been tested in hospitals. “In this case, the idea of having treatments available or a vaccine to facilitate the reentry of students into the fall term would be something that would be a bit of bridge too far,” Dr. Fauci said. Health officials said the key for students to feel safe in returning to school will be more widespread testing, to isolate students who get infected, and effective health practices such as social distancing. Senator Bill Cassidy (R-LA) raised concerns about the effects on children from prolonged school closures. He expressed that students are falling behind on brain development, may not have adequate nutrition, and their parents might not be able to work with kids at home. Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) said it would be “a huge mistake” to keep schools closed this fall while the nation fights the coronavirus pandemic. Dr. Fauci warned that we must “be very careful,” particularly when it comes to how the virus affects children. “Because the more and more we learn, we're seeing things about what this virus can do that we didn't see from the studies in China, or in Europe,” Dr. Fauci explained.

On the subject of worker safety, Senator Paul cited that there is a great deal of evidence that people who have had COVID-19 have immunity from reinfection. He added that the silver lining to meat processing workers getting coronavirus is that they have immunity to return to work safely. Senator Paul continued by saying that outside of New England, it has been a relatively benign course for the virus and we should not take a one-size-fits-all national strategy. Senator Pat Roberts (R-KS) expressed that Kansas is also going through a tough time due to outbreaks in food processing plants. He stressed the importance of diversity in testing methods to minimize the spread of infection. Senator Tina Smith (D-MN) noted that the USDA provided limited guidance regarding worker safety. She was concerned that there might be a spike in cases again if we don’t have clear guidance for food supply workers. Dr. Fauci acknowledged that we must have a proper care system in place to respond to new cases as businesses and processing plants start reopening.

On the topic of testing, Dr. Giroir said the current rate of 10 million tests per month could be expanded by 40 million or 50 million by September to provide more surveillance. Senator Mitt Romney (R-UT) said U.S. testing for coronavirus is “nothing to celebrate” because the country “treaded water” during the early stages of the pandemic while other countries such as South Korea tested people aggressively to curb the outbreak.

Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) asked whether the virus was likely to return in the fall or winter, even if there is a summer lull, as happened with the 1918 flu pandemic. Dr. Fauci said better testing will be available by then to identify and trace who is sick and there will be time to stock up on emergency supplies. Responding to members of the committee, Dr. Fauci stressed that local officials follow the system developed by the federal COVID-19 task force and remain vigilant about a virus that is not going to disappear anytime soon. He raised concern that “we’ll see little spokes that might turn into outbreaks.”