

Chair Cowles, Chancellor Malhotra, and Trustees, thank you for allowing me time this afternoon to share public comments for AFSCME. I am Jennifer Erwin, the President of Minn State Policy Committee.

At yesterday's MDH meeting, Commissioner Jan Malcolm shared that our current COVID numbers are at a level not seen since last December. Our hospitals are running out of space, and MDH doesn't have enough staff to handle all the tests that need to be processed. Minnesota has one of the highest, if not the highest – that depends on when you catch the latest news, positive test result numbers in the country. We all know these data points; we know our numbers are dangerously high, and we have lost over 9,000 Minnesotans since the beginning of the pandemic. Those 9,000 people are co-workers, community members, acquaintances, and family. Husbands, wives, parents, grandparents, kids --- when does it become too many? I think we surpassed that “too many” dashboard at 1 death.

Let me put a personal spin on this – over the last week my family was exposed. My husband, mother-in-law, father-in-law, and sister-in-law, who I have spent the entire pandemic with, all tested positive. I'm the only one who has gotten my booster so far, and I tested negative. That's four out of five people – all breakthrough cases. Thankfully not severe at this point, but with an 83-year-old father-in-law, a mother-in-law with diabetes, a sister-in-law who is immunocompromised and, me with diabetes, it could be much, much worse.

Additionally, in a small department of nine faculty and three staff, we have three faculty out with exposure and one other staff, besides me – just this week. Things are not fine, rosy, or something that should be ignored or swept under the rug. We need to address this now – not wait for the governor to invoke emergency powers again because that's

obviously not going to happen this time. It's time you lead the more than 354,800 students and employees.

We are now facing Thanksgiving next week – when students and employees will be traveling and spending time with people not in their daily bubble. Last year, classes were mainly online and students were told not to come back to campus if they traveled. This year, that's not an option. Individual campuses may make that decision on their own, but there needs to be an immediate system-wide guidance on this issue. Let's pivot now to online course delivery and hope to get our numbers under control before we have to move the entire spring semester online. As I shared previously, four out of five people tested positive – all breakthrough cases of people who have been together for 18 months. What about the families and friends who get together next week who aren't vaccinated?

Our students, faculty and staff need to be more important than enrollment numbers. There are human costs to this pandemic, and we are right in the thick of things again. Last year, campuses were shut down, students were online, and employees were teleworking.

AFSCME employees are on the frontlines and student facing. We are General Maintenance Workers, Customer Service Specialists, Office and Administrative Specialists – just to name a few classifications. We are generally not given the opportunity to telework, because we need to serve the students and be available to them. But we have faculty in the system who LIVE in another state and all their interaction with their students are virtual. Aren't instructors student facing, too? Are faculty not the ones who should have the MOST interactions with students? This is not in disrespect to faculty, but as a way to highlight the inconsistencies across the system.

AFSCME has highlighted these inconsistencies – telework, safety protocols, online vs. on campus class offerings – through this entire pandemic. At the campuses who are allowing telework and majority of online classes, the student and employee COVID numbers are much different than those back on campus. For example, there have been 26 cases at IHCC vs. 107 cases at RCTC since Fall 2021 began. There are still almost 32% of employees teleworking at IHCC and it is rarely, if at all, an opportunity at RCTC. We are losing talented staff to companies that offer telework; we are losing qualified candidates for the same reason. These inconsistencies pits campuses against campuses, employees against employees. In some cases, the reality is teleworking depends on who you are, not what is a business need.

It is time for the System Office to take leadership to make the health and safety of our employees and students mean more to Minn State than the bottom line.

Thank you for your time, and I wish you all a safe and healthy Thanksgiving. I will stand for any questions or comments.