



To: Members of the Council of the District of Columbia

From: Susan Schaeffler, Founder & Executive Director, KIPP DC

Re: Public Roundtable on Student Learning Loss:
Widening the Achievement Gap During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Date: February 10, 2021

Chairman Mendelson and Members of the Council of the District of Columbia --

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon. My name is Susan Schaeffler, and I am the founder and executive director of KIPP DC Public Charter Schools. We operate a network of 18 schools across the city that educate nearly 7,000 District students in grades PreK3 through 12 at our seven campuses located in Wards 5, 6, 7, and 8.

Since KIPP DC schools transitioned to remote learning on March 16, 2020, we have approached our instruction and support with two primary areas of focus:

1. Prioritizing the safety, health, and wellbeing of our entire school community - our students, staff, alumni, and families.
2. Ensuring that KIPP DC students and alumni thrive despite the circumstances with immediate access to academic materials, technology, remote instruction, mental health services, food security, community resources, and a support network.

Over the past year, we've worked more closely with our public charter school peers, DC Public Schools, the Deputy Mayor for Education, and the other city leaders than ever before. We've shared ideas and best practices, learned from each other's missteps, and kept a close eye on school systems around the country as they navigated this unprecedented crisis. Collectively, we've learned that no virtual or hybrid model is perfect - but we're all trying to do our best for our students and families.

Today, I would like to share how KIPP DC has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, our future plans to provide additional academic and social-emotional support to accelerate recovery, and how we could use the support of city leaders moving forward.

KIPP DC's COVID-19 Response to Date

Since we made the transition to remote learning, our teachers have led a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning for our students. **All** students were quickly issued technology devices to learn at home; more than 7,000 Chromebooks, tablets, and, upon request, free wifi hotspots - often delivered by hand to individual students. We built out a remote learning hub on our website to make the full curriculum and learning materials available to students online. And throughout the school year, we have provided printed materials, books, and classroom supplies



- notebooks, pencils, whiteboards, art materials, and more - so that students could still experience the magic of our classrooms while at home.

We have continued to offer a robust mental health support system, special education supports, and wraparound services for families, both virtually and safely in-person in accordance with public health guidance. We implemented regular calls to families to proactively check in on their students and see if and how we could be helpful - not just assuming what they need, but asking them what they need and helping them gain access to it. Seven of our campuses across the city continue to serve as community sites for meal distribution to provide food for all students under the age of 18 in the District of Columbia. And when families said they were anxious about traveling to school to pick up meals, we launched at-home meal delivery service to all families who requested it.

Throughout this time, we have been regularly surveying parents and students, and continue to hear that they are generally happy with virtual learning, but that some want more opportunities to engage in person. So since early fall, KIPP DC has been operating an optional, weekly, in-person program called Wednesday Workshop across the network for any child that was interested. This includes academic enhancement and support for remote learning, limited enrichment activities, social-emotional support, and peer connectivity.

More than 400 families have chosen to send students to campus for in-person support, and approximately 125 staff members have opted-in to help manage this on-site programming for small groups of students in a safe way. This program has expanded after an initial pilot this fall and will continue to run through the end of February.

Focus on Health & Safety

Prioritizing the safety, health, and wellbeing of the entire KIPP DC school community has been a top priority. As we think about our current limited, in-person opportunity for students or a future scaling up of in-person programming, our focus continues to be on health and safety first.

A few areas where we have invested extensive time, operational capacity, and financial resources into making our schools as safe as possible include:

- All KIPP DC facilities have extensive disinfecting procedures, and we have invested more than \$2 million into upgrading our air filtration systems.
- We enforce the use of daily health screenings, contact logs, and thermal-scanning temperature checks at the entrance to each building. Additionally, all students, staff, and contractors in buildings are provided with personal protective equipment.
- Each campus has added staffing, including COVID monitors to ensure systems are in place on a daily basis, in addition to extensive PD to train all staff on site. We have implemented safety protocols to enforce social distancing and limit group gatherings.
- We offer weekly on-site testing clinics for the entire school community, as well as proactive pooled surveillance testing for small groups of teachers and students.



- Staff, students, and families receive regular and transparent communication about health and safety protocols, potential exposure, and mitigation efforts. In the coming weeks, we will launch a dashboard of confirmed COVID cases and quarantines for staff and students.
- We are working closely with OSSE, the Deputy Mayor for Education's office, and the DC Charter School Alliance to ensure that our in-person staff have access to vaccinations. And I'm pleased to report that more than 200 of them have already received their first dose - but we need access to vaccines for ALL staff before we can fully reopen.

KIPP DC's Plans for the Future

Starting in March, we will expand our in-person offerings - **fully optional for both staff and students** - but we will remain laser-focused on continuing a rich remote-learning experience. We plan to structure our school days with rigorous, academic mornings focused on core content, and dynamic afternoons (either in person or remote) focused on extracurriculars, specials, community building, and social-emotional support.

We built this remote-learning experience that prioritizes quality and consistency, anchored by these guiding principles:

1. Our belief that a virtual model combined with an in-person enrichment and intervention model is our strongest option to offer a **more focused, consistent, productive learning experience** for the majority of our students.
2. Our belief that a virtual model allows for **stronger core content delivery** for the majority of our students with the fewest distractions or disruptions.
3. Parent feedback and input has encouraged us to **focus on quality of instruction, consistency**, and maintaining **current high parent satisfaction** with our virtual model, while we increase in person enrichment and intervention options.

We will offer one of two options at every school, offering students, families, and staff a model that meets the unique needs of each school community:

1. Many families expressed an interest in in-person enrichment and peer interaction opportunities, and these pods will occur at schools on four afternoons a week.
2. Other families shared full-day in-person learning pods would be helpful. That will be available at some schools four days a week, supporting students' remote learning success and social-emotional wellness.

As health metrics improve and more vaccines are available, we will carefully monitor the situation to see what's working and what more we can do in May and June to continue to further expand our in-person programming.

Then, as we look ahead to the summer, we are already deep in planning to provide additional academic interventions and recovery for many of our students:

- We are in the process of developing an intensive literacy tutoring program with The Literacy Lab that has the capacity to support up to 500 students in kindergarten through 4th grade.



- We are also pursuing a tutoring program that supports our students in 3rd through 8th grade with mathematics intervention.
- And lastly, we are tapping into the District’s resources by working with a number of community-based organizations to host on-site camp experiences and sponsor KIPP DC students in those summer programs.

How Schools Could Use Support

As we remain focused on safely reopening schools and continuing to provide a rich learning experience for students, I can assure you: our teachers have worked tirelessly to make remote learning as successful as possible over the past year.

While we are doing everything we can to accelerate learning and make up for a loss in traditional, in-person instructional time, we must remind ourselves that our school communities have experienced a great trauma over the past year, and our students, families, and teachers need as much support and care as possible. Even the way we characterize “learning loss” has the potential to further stigmatize our students, looking at our learners and our systems through the lens of deficits, rather than assets and strengths.

We must remind ourselves that our students have faced unique challenges and grown in ways we never expected of them over the past year. Our city must consider the impact of the pandemic and the time at home from an asset-based lens. We must consider the systems and supports necessary to assist students and families with the potential anxiety or concerns that a return to school may cause, and plan from an asset-based, trauma-informed lens.

We need to welcome our students back with a warm, positive culture; help them love school again, feel safe, and honor the experiences they have had at home with their families; ensure they have the social-emotional infrastructure in place to support them; and re-instill a sense of trust, constancy, and belonging within their school community.

There are many ways that city leaders can help support our efforts. **We expect that returning to the “new normal” will be at least a two-year effort that will require continued flexibility, resources, financial support, and sector-wide alignment.** As you consider how you can support reopening schools, we’d encourage you to prioritize the following themes:

Alternative Ways of Measuring Success

We should ensure our students are not put on academic “hyper-drive” at the expense of holistic education practices in recovery. While a baseline measure of their academic proficiency is important, our students should **not** be called back to school to spend a month preparing for and taking high-stakes PARCC tests when they could be optimizing that valuable instructional time with their teachers. I would encourage the Office of the State Superintendent of Education to pursue a waiver from federal requirements mandating standardized testing during this time when we must be 100% focused on recovery.



Continued Alignment & Partnership

Over the past year, city leaders have done an excellent job at coordinating resources and information so that schools can effectively adapt and respond during this crisis. As we look ahead to reopening, we need city leaders to provide a **framework** for how to do this safely within DC Health and CDC guidelines, but also **flexibility** in programming and process to allow us to be responsive to the needs and interests of our students, staff, and families. We believe that some students and families will continue to need virtual instruction in the 2021-22 school year - perhaps beyond - and we have a plan for that as well.

Consistent, Reliable Funding & Resources

The Council and Mayor Bowser have been generous with financial support for schools, allowing us access to the resources, human capital, and student experiences that are critical to running high-quality, equitable schools. While a surge of federal funding will support some of the immediate costs associated with reopening schools safely - including facilities improvements, health and safety supplies and equipment, technology, and additional staffing - many of these investments will have lingering costs years into the future. We hope that the Council will continue to prioritize strong, consistent, reliable public funding of our city's public schools.

While the current pandemic and its effects are challenging, we remain focused and committed to being innovative and responsive to meeting the needs of our students, families, and staff. I want to thank the Council for creating this space to hear more about the experience of our school community. I know that we are all aligned on the same goal and value your partnership and leadership in ensuring students across the city continue to receive quality instruction and strong support so that they can thrive.

I am happy to answer any questions you have.

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