**COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

**COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE**

**PUBLIC HEARING**

**Roundtable on Returning to School and Academic Recovery**

**May 24, 2021**

Council Chair Mendelson and the Committee of the Whole, I am the Revered Dr. Kendrick E. Curry, a Ward 7 resident, and the Pastor of the Pennsylvania Avenue Baptist Church also located in Ward 7. I am honored to testify today at the **Roundtable on Returning to School and Academic Recovery.**

Over the last year, our nation has faced dual cataclysms: the global COVID-19 pandemic afflicting millions and the long-overdue reckoning of the centuries-old scourge of racism. These issues are both layered and compacted, and crammed in between the punishing weight of both of are our Black and Brown children.

Public schools stand as one of the primary means of supporting our children and helping them to achieve their fullest potential. But that promise of support is threatened as our schools move into this unprecedented, post-pandemic school year. With the return to classroom instruction, students who are the furthest from opportunity face a new set of obstacles to the promise of a high-quality public education. They face barriers which at a minimum include learning loss, mental health challenges (e.g., depression, anxiety, brain fog, memory loss, etc.) and other unknown effects of long-COVID. These obstacles are further complicated by racial and education inequity as well as health misinformation and post-pandemic reentry hesitancy.

So, if we are to successfully return to school and begin the road to academic recovery, there are several things our city must do: First, we must seek to rebuild trust. After a year of shared trauma, many have understandable social phobia and fear of returning to schools. We should engage parents, students and community organizations now to openly discuss their concerns about returning to school. Then, this summer, we should reopen schools, provide tours and programming for parents, students, and community partners to reacclimate them to being in school, and so that they can see for themselves that schools are safe and that their concerns have been addressed.

Parents seem more comfortable with people and places of trust and familiarity. We have found that hosting COVID-19 testing and vaccination at the church—a place of trust and familiarity—builds trust and confidence. Likewise, the District can use summer camps, learning opportunities, and programming as a way of building trust in parents to bring their kids back to school in the Fall. Department of Parks and Recreation Summer camps employ outdoor programming and provide an alternative to immediately sending kids back into classrooms. Opportunities for collaboration between schools and community centers could deepen community trust.

Another important key to building trust is utilizing community partners and organizations—including churches and house of worship—to spread the message that children are safe in school and need to be back in school in-person in the Fall. The voice of credible community partners helps to allay community angst and builds confidence.

Second, District schools must support students and families when they return to school in the Fall and several years in the future. The job isn’t over when the child shows up on day 1 of school in the Fall. We need to not only get the child to school in the Fall, but we must make sure that students and families have the resources and supports at school so that they can thrive next year and the succeeding years thereafter.

Third, schools should be used as trusted institutions for vaccine distribution. Schools and educators are trusted in the community. Leveraging this trust and convenience could boost vaccine confidence and help get vaccines into harder-to-reach populations of both students and parents.

Finally, in the FY 2022 budget, the Council should prioritize:

* + Mental health/Long COVID supports
  + Academic support
  + A renewed focus on social-emotional growth
  + Extending the school day and year for additional learning and social opportunities
  + Restoring enrichment activities before, during and after school
  + Provide college and career counseling and mentorships to ensure that high school students remain on track for success after graduation.
  + Unconscious bias training for students, parents, teachers and staff

Public education is the foundation of our collective civility, the keystone of our democratic ideals and the pinnacle of our aspirations for more equitable society. If we are to see District schools thrive, we must appeal to our collective civility, democratic ideals, and aspirations of society equity by engaging the community, opening the schools this summer, vaccinating families in schools, partnering with community centers and honoring the budgetary priorities listed. When we do these things, we shall see families flourish in the post-pandemic era of school reentry.

Thank you for allowing me to testify.