



Testimony Before the Council of the District of Columbia
Committee of the Whole

at the Public Roundtable
School Reopening and Academic Recovery:
Hearing from Experts

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Good morning, Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee. My name is Shannon Hodge and I am the Founding Executive Director of the DC Charter School Alliance, the local non-profit that advocates on behalf of public charter schools to ensure that all students in the District receive the great public education they deserve. Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the challenges school leaders are facing with adequate and affordable facilities access on our road to educational recovery and acceleration of student progress.

Background

The District of Columbia's public charter schools are committed to providing safe and nurturing learning environments for the 44,000 students we serve as well as the approximately 10,000 teachers, staff, and leaders who support them.

Safely reopening schools and resuming in-person learning comes with myriad challenges. But perhaps the biggest unsolved challenges relate to affordably maintaining safe facilities with enough space to comply with public health guidelines. As school leaders and students prepare for the next school year, they need clear communication and coordination with city agencies, including clear directives about public health guidance. They need realistic solutions to providing safe facilities and sufficient space for bringing students back to school full-time. And they need an appropriate level of funding to ensure they can keep up with rising construction costs to ensure school buildings are safe and well-maintained.

Coordination with DME and City Agencies

From the very early days of the pandemic, **public charter school leaders have struggled on multiple fronts to appropriately coordinate and communicate with city agencies about programmatic changes that will affect their operations.** While our member schools are appreciative of the regular coordination calls hosted by the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME), as leaders have identified coordination barriers, rather than having systemic barriers addressed, they have largely been advised to individually outreach to city agencies for guidance. When school leaders have attempted to obtain information directly from various city agencies, as directed by DME, those agencies have often been unresponsive or resistant to coordinating with individual charter schools about strategies and decisions that will affect them.

Said another way, **all too often school leaders receive important information with limited detail at the same time as the broader public.** School leaders are not given appropriate early insights into these announcements, preventing them from adjusting their plans and being responsive and attentive to the needs of their communities. Pandemic-era decision-making that is already complicated even made even more so when school leaders are surprised by last-minute announcements that they are expected to follow. **A simple adjustment of better coordination**

and communication would enable school leaders to adjust plans and operations within their school communities.

Health Guidance

Since November of 2020, **charter school leaders have repeatedly laid out what schools need from city officials that would enable schools to safely bring more students back to buildings for in-person learning.** One key barrier is the lack of clear, updated public health guidance from DC Health as federal and district guidelines have rapidly shifted, particularly as COVID vaccines are becoming more widely available.

One recent example of the difficulties we've experienced in receiving clear guidance is related to a recurring request from school leaders that the public health guidance clearly delineate requirements from best practices and that the messaging about that delineation be clear. When asked recently in a large-group meeting for this level of clarity, an agency staffer told school leaders to search for the word "must" within public health guidance documents to find out what aspects schools are required to safely operate their facilities. This type of response doesn't help school leaders meet the needs and concerns of their communities, nor does it allow them confidently and safely continue to expand in-person learning opportunities.

Even as we have shared frustrations with the city on the problems within the existing guidance, including the need to clarify certain aspects that schools need to operate, DC Health has instead told school leaders that public health guidance should be treated as optional. For example, health guidance is unclear about whether implementing three feet of physical distancing between students is a best practice or a requirement. This lack of clarity is problematic for our school leaders—space is limited, and physical distancing requirements need to be clearly communicated for school leaders to appropriately plan for the number of students who can occupy a space. **School leaders need clear directives about what is required for safety and what is not to effectively operate in-person learning.**

Space Challenges

Safe facilities and sufficient square footage for expanding in-person learning opportunities for students are more important now than ever. That means that some of our schools will need additional space to accommodate more students, yet many of the solutions being discussed don't take into account the reality of managing students across multiple buildings. For example, the convention center has been discussed as a potential option for excess space for schools that need it. But that's not a viable solution—additional space must be in proximity to existing buildings for school leaders and staff to properly manage students across buildings.

To address proximity issues, some of our schools would benefit from partnering with nearby recreation centers or libraries. But DME must be in charge of setting up these partnerships with the Department of Parks and Recreation, instead of individual schools attempting to do so without the assistance of a citywide coordinated approach.

Other schools have outdoor space that could be leveraged for additional classrooms by erecting outdoor structures or using trailers. But many schools have reported that the city is requiring permits for both—and that the permitting process is likely to take more than six months. An efficient, cost-effective solution to this problem is simply for the city to expedite the permitting process.

Finally, other schools don't have the benefit of a nearby facility or outdoor areas that could be leveraged for additional classroom space. But if the health guidance on physical distancing rules *are* required and not optional, they need more space. These schools must have the flexibility to more effectively use their existing facilities, and that means creating more space by removing a significant amount of furniture from the building. But furniture storage is costly.

Fully Funding the Facilities Allotment

As we continue to expand our in-person offerings to students, we must ensure our school buildings are safe and well-maintained. In D.C., space is a premium. Managing facilities is costly, and the need to lease extra space to follow distancing guidelines for students and staff is a significant investment. According to a survey the DC Alliance conducted on facilities needs, completed by nearly two-thirds of charter school leaders, 70% of charter school leaders reported increasing facilities costs during the pandemic.

Those costs are rising. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the cost of constructing new school buildings has risen by an average of 3.1 percent each year from 2016 to 2020, in comparison to an average of 2.2 percent each year from 2010 to 2014¹. And thanks to rising construction and materials costs from a surge in activity during the pandemic, minor improvements and maintenance costs have gone up significantly. In the same survey, two out of every three school leaders reported they anticipated increases in facilities costs ranging from 2 percent to more than 10 percent next year. Only 5 percent of respondents said they didn't anticipate any increases.

Schools have already invested thousands of dollars this school year to ensure buildings can support in-person learning this spring and next school year. But the current facilities allotment is not sufficient to cover costs. More than half of charter school leaders are unable to cover all facilities costs with charter facilities funding at the current allotment level.

¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, [Producer Price Index \(PPI\) for new school construction](#)

That's why the next budget must increase the facilities allotment for charter schools by 3.1 percent to mirror the average of new school construction costs. Nearly 60 percent of survey respondents expressed that there would be a significant or very significant impact on student and staff safety and reopening needs if they didn't receive a facilities allotment increase next school year. One school leader reported that "unless the City makes a commitment to fund facilities at a more realistic amount, over time more and more of our UPSFF will need to be re-directed away from direct student services and teacher salaries in order to afford our rent."

Consistent funding of our facilities is key for both budget predictability for school leaders and providing a safe learning environment for our students. For that reason, charter school facilities must be included as a priority in the budget.

Finally, as I shared with the Committee in March, what our schools need are bold and targeted financial supports. That includes not only fully and appropriately funding the facilities allotment, but also:

- Increasing the UPSFF foundation formula by 4 percent;
- Fully funding the at-risk and English Language Learner weights to the levels recommended by the 2013 adequacy study to ensure schools have the resources they need to support their most vulnerable students; and
- Providing an additional \$6.4 million to fund the expansion of the DC Department of Behavioral Health's school-based mental health program.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter, and I welcome your questions.