

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF DEPUTY MAYOR FOR EDUCATION**



Public Roundtable
“Re-Opening District of Columbia Public Schools and District of Columbia Public Charter
Schools”

Testimony of
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Before the
Committee of the Whole
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairman

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Council of the District of Columbia
Virtual

John A. Wilson Building
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Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson, Councilmembers, staff, and members of the community. My name is Paul Kihn and I am the Deputy Mayor of Education for the District of Columbia. I appreciate this opportunity to testify on the reopening of our public schools here in Washington, DC.

In April, Mayor Bowser charged us with reopening our schools for in-person learning because students thrive in the classroom. We knew that reopening our schools would be one of the greatest efforts our city's education system has ever faced. It has been a remarkable and challenging experience for our community. Schools, educators, students, and families have all shouldered an enormous amount, and they deserve extraordinary credit and our city's gratitude. We welcome the opportunity to come before you today to provide an update on reopening.

First and foremost, we are working hard to keep our schools safe, and believe **our students are safe in our schools. This belief is based on the local and national science and our commitment to the use of layered mitigation strategies that have been shown to reduce the spread of COVID-19.**

In partnership with DC Health, we have been closely monitoring the data around COVID-19. As we know, the percentage of cases in children across the country is rising, as children make up a higher proportion of the unvaccinated who are most likely to become infected. At the same time, we also know that children are still very unlikely to become seriously ill or hospitalized. We are tracking and share data on positive case counts at every public school in the District on a weekly basis through the coronavirus.dc.gov dashboard. We are committed to an even more robust and transparent data sharing system – both as our responsibility to public accountability, and to drive our own planning and response efforts.

While the virus may be changing, the tools to thwart it have not, including masks, distancing, ventilation, vaccines, and testing.

Our schools have implemented universal mask mandates, including for all staff, students, and visitors. Our schools have prioritized physical distancing by spacing our desks to the greatest extent within classrooms, and we have encouraged schools to utilize outside learning spaces where possible.

As part of our reopening, Mayor Bowser and DCPS invested more than \$24 million in system-wide HVAC upgrades to improve filtration and ventilation in every DCPS building, and every DCPS classroom has a HEPA filter to clean the air within that space. For the District's Charter schools, we created two grant programs for a total investment of \$20 million to support their return to safe in-person instruction, prioritizing facilities-related expenditures such as heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) and other systems upgrades.

This week, Mayor Bowser took bold action requiring all adults who are regularly in schools and child care facilities in the District to be vaccinated against COVID-19, without an option for testing out. The Mayor's Order further requires students aged 12 and older to be fully vaccinated to participate in school-based extracurricular athletics. The vaccination requirements apply to all employees, contractors, interns, and volunteers working in person in all DC schools and child care facilities. This critical measure has added to the robust layered protections already in place to protect students who are not eligible yet to be vaccinated and will reduce the spread of

COVID-19. The city continues to operate and promote our youth vaccination program, offering COVID vaccinations and appointments for routine pediatric immunizations at more than 35 school-based locations, as well as special incentives for students ages 12-17 who get their first shot. Since the launch of the youth incentive program in early August almost 4,000 more youth have become fully vaccinated and more than 675 have received their first shot at one of our incentive site locations.

Across the District, over 55% of students aged 12-15 are fully or partially vaccinated, and 53.5% of students ages 16-17 are fully or partially vaccinated. We are continuing our efforts to increase vaccination rate by working closely with school leaders on continued grassroots outreach and launching a new partnership with Howard University School of Medicine to bring medical residents to DCPS middle and high schools.

In addition to our symptomatic testing program for all students and staff, OSSE has launched a city-wide asymptomatic testing program serving all DCPS schools and most charter schools. We adjusted the asymptomatic program to an opt-out system to test more students. We are encouraged by early testing data. As of September 14, out of 7,692 total tests performed in OSSE's COVID-19 school-based testing symptomatic and asymptomatic programs, OSSE has confirmed 49 positive cases, for a positive case rate of .6%.¹ As of September 7, the city-wide 7-day positivity was 5.0%.

Along with believing our students are safe in our buildings, we remain absolutely committed to in-person learning to **prevent the widening of opportunity gaps** in our city.

We have seen the impacts of a year of virtual learning and how it exacerbates learning loss, and the Council has rightfully been concerned with its longer-term consequences. An analysis of learning loss across the city during the first nine months of the pandemic showed concerning declines in academic achievement in Math and Reading. Early literacy proficiency (grades K-2) fell by 12 percentage points for all students; fell by 16 percentage points for students at-risk; and fell by 19 percentage points for students attending schools in Wards 7 and 8. Students at-risk of academic failure in grades 3-8 lost five months in math and four months in reading. And learning loss impacts are predicted to cause lasting harm: students may earn \$49,000 to \$61,000 less over their lifetime due to a loss of learning and other impacts from the pandemic². That impact is even more pronounced for Black and Hispanic students.

We are also hearing from teachers that students are returning to their classrooms much further behind than expected, so our heroic educators are in some instances scrambling to revise their curricula and lesson plans to meet the needs of their students who have been learning at home for too long. As you know, the District did not administer a statewide assessment last year which is our best way to report publicly about academic achievement. In lieu, OSSE collected data from LEAs about the administration of their local formative assessments which is not standardized across schools. Although we cannot draw the same system-level conclusions that we could with

² McKinsey & Company, [COVID-19 and education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning](#)

the statewide assessment, we know that many students did not make expected academic progress last year when schools were serving students mostly through distance learning.

We also know that **children's development and social and emotional health benefits from in-person learning**. The pandemic has exacerbated the mental health issues that students were already facing. This, coupled with isolation, limited peer-to-peer interactions and stress and fear from the pandemic have had a strong impact on our youth.

In our own local community engagement, nearly 160 parents, students, and educators stressed the need for mental health and social-emotional support. During DME's spring listening session series on the pandemic and the community's priorities for a safe reopening and full recovery, mental health and social-emotional support was the most prevalent need that emerged. A full return to in-person learning, ensures all students can access these vital services through caring clinicians and social workers on site. That is why Mayor Bowser invested an additional \$8 million to expand school-based mental health services to every DCPS and public charter school.

Given that the stakes are so high, **how are we collectively doing?**

Our indicators of student engagement as evidenced through enrollment and attendance show early success and steady progress; we are slightly ahead on student enrollment from last year and we are seeing hundreds of students return daily. As of Tuesday, September 14, 87,477 students had completed stage 5 enrollment, which represents an increase of almost 3,000 more students than SY20-21.

We are also doing well with our health-related operations. We have strong responses to positive cases of COVID-19 in the school community, and our health and safety guidance for schools ensures that when a positive case is detected, the community is swiftly notified, and impacted students and staff are immediately dismissed. To achieve this, we have grown and strengthened our school-based and central contact-tracing teams over the past few weeks.

We have also worked with our schools to issue clear communications regarding when a case has occurred, what the next steps are, and how we will ensure learning continues for students.

We are also excited about the work we have done to strengthen our return to in-person learning and support other family and student needs. This includes the launch of our new micro-transit shuttle program, which has already completed more than 700 student trips serving 20 schools. The Office for Out of School Time launched two grant programs to find strong CBO partners to bolster our Safe Passage program and expand school capacity to implement high-impact tutoring to students most in need.

We deeply understand that some families remain concerned, and there are challenges we must relentlessly address. We are constantly learning and adapting to the conditions of the pandemic and working tirelessly to ensure our schools have the resources they need. **We have, and will continue, to listen to stakeholder concerns to make smart, thoughtful adjustments.** We have already enacted several important changes in the last few weeks including system level improvements to OSSE's testing and Positive Case Response Team programs to clarify roles, update protocols and scripts, and launch a series of community of practice sessions for education leaders and staff. At the DME, we are also equipping our school leaders with additional supports,

tools, and resources, particularly around communications and the identified challenge areas for arrival/dismissal, lunch, and inclement weather. This includes consultations and office hours to problem solve.

Through this work and the entirety of our recovery efforts, we are collectively striving to strengthen our children's present and future. According to data and numerous accounts from leaders, teachers, students, and parents, we have had a strong first few weeks of in-person learning. But we also recognize this unprecedented reopening has caused anxiety, stress, and at times frustration and uncertainty for families and educators. We will certainly encounter obstacles, hit roadblocks, and must adapt. We will do this guided by the feedback from our community and the best science and data available. We are all on the same team, and I look forward to working with each of you as we continue to navigate the shared challenges posed by the pandemic.