

DC State Board of Education Testimony on DCPS Reopening

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Given: Wednesday, August 18, 2021

After today's Mayoral press conference, I am left with a deep feeling of sadness due to the callousness that we are treating the prospect of students getting infected with COVID. It is deeply irresponsible to not have metrics and a plan in place to make quick pivots to virtual instruction if community spread and case numbers are too high. While businesses and government offices are pushing back their in-person work requirements, DCPS is pushing forward without any real planning or details around contingencies. This is a recipe for chaos.

I have testified for years on **DCPS lack of follow through** when it comes to promises made in press conferences and the reality in our schools. It didn't change last year, and I have no reason to believe this upcoming school year will be any different. We still have schools with air circulation problems, lack of supplies, and mask mandates and social distancing only being partially enforced. Schools will be largely on their own in trying to fix it. Local schools have learned the hard way that asking DCPS for support yields disbelief, gaslighting and punishment. It has never been acceptable, it is even less acceptable in a pandemic.

Our students and their families will be at significant risk if they reenter our schools unvaccinated. The numbers for 12-18-year-old vaccination rates in Wards 5, 7 and 8 are staggeringly low. It is irresponsible to force families to send students to school in person if their child is not vaccinated, regardless of the reason for it. Families should have virtual options. I am not a fan of simultaneous teaching by any means, but I believe that it should be an option for students until they are fully vaccinated, to protect their lives.

Let's be perfectly clear. The Mayor and her top-level team do not support the very existence of our neighborhood public schools. They will allow the chaos to reign, parents to put their students in charters or home school and throw up their hands with the new student based budgeting plan and say there's nothing they can do when they close schools and turn them over to charter operators. Privatization during a crisis is nothing new, in fact it is the Democrats for Education Reform playbook.

This means that the DCPS reopening plan is also about saving our neighborhood public schools. If parents are not provided a way to stay with their local school and learn virtually until their students are vaccinated our local schools will be the ones that suffer.

Now to the specifics: DCPS leadership has never shown an interest in questions of implementation. Included in my testimony are questions and issues that must be dealt with immediately, since as of yet I have not seen anything that will help me as a classroom teacher know what I am supposed to do for in person instruction.

1. **Vaccines.** I hope that DCPS is asked what they are doing to get as many of our vaccine eligible students vaccinated. I am so happy every time I see the hours at HD Woodson for people to get vaccinated – but what is being done beyond the regular forms of communication to make sure everyone knows of the opportunities and is getting to the school to get them? We know that communication to our families has consistently been an issue, so what methods are being done to meet people where they are and get them the information?
2. **Health Protocols.**
 - a. DCPS needs to provide higher quality masks to staff and students.
 - b. regular on-site, asymptomatic testing of all students and staff. I believe it should be ask close to 100% as possible.
 - c. Clear parameters for when a classroom or school must quarantine.
 - d. Classrooms should continue to socially distance– which means different furniture in certain classrooms. If a school is overcrowded determinations must be made with that particular school for how to lessen the crowding in those classrooms. If that means hiring more teachers, having different schedules, staggered entry, etc. then that is what should happen.
 - e. Schools must have the necessary ventilation and filters in place and educators should be trained in how best to utilize this technology to mitigate risk.
 - f. Assistance and clear direction with classroom transitions (i.e., clear directional markings and spacing), entry/exit and meals in particular are going to be incredibly important if we don't want to see huge spikes in the spread of COVID in our schools.
3. **Implementation.** DCPS does not have a good track record of following through with what is on paper to reality. I have testified countless times on issues like the lack of supplies such as soap, proper staffing levels, and little to no follow through on enforcing what is put in place on paper. When I taught my 3-5 students in person, getting them to properly mask was a herculean effort and made it hard to teach. We need clear enforcement mechanisms that balance the need to keep each other safe with not being overly punitive. We also need assistance in training our students in how to act inside a school under COVID protocols. Older students are used to a level of freedom of movement that simply will not be safe at this time, so we need to be prepared. When it comes to academics, we need to have parameters and technology in place for quick pivots to quarantine. The metrics look grim right now and other school districts currently in summer school are experiencing many closures. We need clear guidance on what is expected of students and teachers if and when we must quarantine for a given period of time. These implementation plans should be made in close consultation with the WTU teams in each school with SUPPORT from

DCPS central office if and when needed (despite what DCPS thinks, this basically never happens now).

4. **Culture of Fear.** DCPS historically punishes those who speak out and expose wrongdoing in their buildings. The Council must protect workers who speak up and ensure that there is no retaliation either inside the school or from DCPS Central Office if we report problems.
5. **Family Choice.** Parents should have the continued right to make the decisions that are best for their family. OSSE's paperwork is too strict for parents to opt in to virtual instruction and it is outrageous that families should be forced to take risks they do not want to take.
6. **Messaging.** It is NOT safe to return to in person instruction. Advertising it as such is a recipe for disaster. We need to instill the importance of following the health protocols at all times due to the danger that the Delta variant poses. This does not mean living in complete fear, but acting like everything is normal is mixed messaging that puts our students at risk.