

January 29, 2021

Dear PPS Leadership, PPS School Board, Governor Kate Brown, and ODE Director Colt Gill,

In the past weeks, there has been a lot of talk about the urgency to open school buildings for in-person instruction in Portland Public Schools. The Governor's decision in December to loosen the metrics for returning to in-person instruction led to a torrent of demands from some parents and community members to open schools immediately, often citing racial equity as the rationale. PPS and ODE frequently communicate their commitment to centering racial equity, and in this moment, it is crucial that you put that belief into practice.

As a union, it is our responsibility to listen to, and advocate for, the concerns of our members. As schools begin making plans to open buildings for in-person instruction, members have expressed a deep concern for how reopening buildings, while Covid-19 is still spreading, will negatively impact our students of color, whose families have been most impacted by the pandemic.

These concerns are underscored by the fact that, to our knowledge, neither PPS nor ODE have gathered meaningful and widespread input from families of color to learn if the goal of returning to live instruction is in line with the needs and wishes of families of color in our district.

We ask that no plans for the reopening of schools be made without intentional outreach and extensive feedback from families of color. We ask that you survey all families of color, and build any reopening plans around that feedback, to ensure that any plans for reopening do not result in furthering inequities.

Members of our PAT Racial Equity Committee have surfaced the following issues and concerns that we would like to underscore:

1. Oregon and the United States have a history of medical and academic experimentation on Black, Indigenous, and Asian children. The decision to focus in-person LIPI programming at our TSI and CSI schools (which also serve the highest numbers of students of color) may be intended to address racial equity; however, without outreach

to families of color, **piloting reopening plans at the minority of schools that serve a majority of students of color, resembles past experimentation.**

2. Looking at the data as a whole, Oregon may appear to be relatively safe from Covid-19 compared with other states, and many within our city may feel removed from the greatest costs of Covid. However, other communities within this same city are having a different experience. **Families of Latin-American, Black, and Indigenous heritage in Portland are far more likely than white families to have experienced a Covid-19-related death or hospitalization,** and continue to have the highest rate of sickness in our city. Equitable decision-making must center the needs and experiences of the most impacted.
3. Public Health officials who spoke at the January 12th School Board meeting predicted that another winter/early spring wave of Covid-19 is coming. The discovery of more easily transmissible strains of the virus, the full impact of which isn't yet known, brings even greater risk to communities disproportionately impacted by Covid-19. **Combined with school reopening in already-impacted communities, these factors could cause unintended harm and increased mortality rates in these communities.**
4. Oregon has not reached herd immunity to Covid-19. Without frequent testing and adequate contact tracing, schools can not prevent asymptomatic or presymptomatic carriers from spreading Covid-19 within schools, and therefore back to families. **If our schools and classrooms become vectors of disease, we stand to lose the fragile trust we are working hard to build with our communities.**
5. We have not heard a call for a hasty reopening from Black and Indigenous community members or leaders. It appears that reopening plans come as a response to pressure from a small group of parents. While every parent has the right to speak for themselves, **the district and the state have the obligation to hear from everyone, and to center the voices of those who are systematically marginalized.**

It will take a huge shift of resources and attention to open schools for in-person instruction. Looking at other large school districts around the country, there is a pattern that when schools have reopened, families of color have been the least likely to choose to attend live classes. In other words, in order to provide an in-person option, those districts are shifting resources away from students of color remaining in distance learning, in order to create an opportunity that will most likely benefit white students. Rather than closing the opportunity gap, the impact in these cases is to widen it. Such a path would be in opposition of our shared goal of centering the needs of our students and families of color.

We must not make assumptions about what families want or will do. We ask that you intentionally seek the input of educators and families of color across the district, be transparent about the results, and use those to guide any plans to reopen schools.

Thank you,

Elizabeth Thiel,
President, Portland Association of Teachers
On behalf of the PAT Executive Board

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