



COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
THE JOHN A. WILSON BUILDING
1350 PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE, NW
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20004

November 2, 2020

Dr. Lewis Ferebee, Chancellor
District of Columbia Public Schools
1200 First Street NE
Washington, DC, 20002

Dear Chancellor Ferebee:

As elected officials who represent DC Public Schools (DCPS) families, **we agree with your decision this morning to delay the November 9 start date to bring back students and teachers to school buildings for limited in-person instruction.**

We also agree that in-person instruction is the best option both for learning and for social-emotional development, especially for our most vulnerable and high-needs students. However, returning to the classroom will only be successful if our teachers and DCPS families trust the plan and feel it is safe. Building trust will take collaboration and input from all constituencies: students, teachers, parents, principals, administrative staff, and the community. This collaborative process was missing from the initial DCPS #ReopenStrong plan, as the Public Employee Relations Board (PERB) order made clear and as we heard from families across the District.

We want to work with you and our DCPS families to get in-person learning back on track. A re-start needs to meet the requirements of the law regarding negotiations with the Washington Teachers' Union as outlined by the PERB order, as well as meet a high standard of equity, safety, and sound logistics for our students, parents, and staff.

In order to move forward in a more inclusive way, we recommend that DCPS convene a working group of teachers, parents, and administrators, both to ensure input into the plan as well as look to best practices from other public and independent schools who have brought students back to classrooms. The group could draw from members of the parent advisory group, unions representing teachers and other staff, and the State Board of Education to help develop and advise on any reopening plan.

We need to be clear about three important goals when returning students to the classroom: equity, safety, and sound logistics. There are ongoing concerns in each area.

For example, in terms of equity, we had concerns that even though the initial plan prioritized English language learners and students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP), specialized instruction and supports might not have been in place to make in-classroom instruction more beneficial for these students than the current distance learning approach.

In terms of safety, there remain concerns about the role of testing in keeping our staff and DCPS families safe, especially as we see an uptick in COVID-19 numbers in our city and across the country. When the Reopen plan was first announced October 5, there was no mention of a testing regime at all. We are glad DCPS is now committing to testing students and staff who are exhibiting COVID symptoms, which is a good first step. But it is not clear that is sufficient, especially considering CDC guidance for testing in schools, which specifically states, “Asymptomatic staff, teachers and students who are not close contacts [with positive cases] should also be considered for testing in schools where the risk of transmission is moderate to high.” (DC’s current number of new cases over the past 14 days places it well within the “higher risk” category.)

We know DCPS and the Department of General Services has invested time and money to make buildings in compliance with CDC guidance, and it is good to see each school has a building readiness checklist. Making this information easily understandable and accessible will help build a sense of trust and safety in our school communities.

Finally, our understanding is that DCPS has already begun assigning personnel from middle and high schools to staff the elementary school classrooms, which has raised concerns about how those schools will function without these critical staff members. Therefore, we also urge you to pause implementation of CARE classrooms until there is agreement on how they will be staffed and how current students will not be negatively affected.

We all share a common goal: to educate our students equitably and give them the best opportunity to succeed. In order to do that, we need more collaboration, communication, and transparency to show our educational professionals and families that we are focused on equity and safety, always. Rapidly increasing the level of communication to meet this moment of urgency is paramount in establishing trust in a time of crisis. We look to working with you on accomplishing this goal.

Sincerely,



Elissa Silverman
Councilmember, At-Large



Brianne K. Nadeau
Councilmember, Ward 1



Trayon White, Sr.
Councilmember, Ward 8



Charles Allen
Councilmember, Ward 6



Robert C. White, Jr.
Councilmember, At-Large

Cc: Muriel Bowser, Mayor of the District of Columbia
Paul Kihn, Deputy Mayor for Education
Councilmembers of the District of Columbia