



Reopening our Schools

*Recommendations from the Washington Teachers' Union
& the WTU Reopen DC Taskforce*

June 22, 2020

The members of the Washington Teachers' Union (WTU) look forward to the reopening of our schools and the resumption of in-person learning. However, consistent with Department of Health recommendations, until an effective treatment is widely available or a vaccine is developed for COVID-19, our city will need to develop a new path to safely and responsibly continue the education of District students. The District's plans to reopen our schools must prioritize protecting the health of teachers, students and our communities in order to ensure teachers are able to fulfil our mission of educating students and preparing them for college and careers.

The District of Columbia's Reopen DC Committeeⁱ recommendations, along with guidance from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education,ⁱⁱ provide a general, science-based, framework for the conditions that our city must meet to reopen our schools. However, these broad recommendations fail to address many of the on-the-ground realities facing our teacher workforce, who will be at high-risk for exposure to the coronavirus as we restart face-to-face instruction. As the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) system develops plans to reopen our schools, we need to address these realities; delays to the Fiscal Year 2021 budget process caused by the COVID-19 crisis allows the city to realign resources to meet the new challenges facing our school systems and educators.

The Washington Teachers' Union convened a taskforce lead, consisting of nearly 200 teachers, who examined the challenges that teachers will face as the District of Columbia returns to in-person learning, in some form this summer. They identified barriers to the resumption of in-person learning and improvements to distance learning. This report contains the findings, recommendations, and outstanding questions of the WTU's Reopen DC Taskforce, a group of nearly 200 teachers.

Earlier this spring, the American Federation of Teachers' (AFT) released a detailed, science-based "Plan to Safely Reopen America's Schools and Communities"ⁱⁱⁱ that features five core pillars based on science as well as educator and healthcare expertise – not on politics or wishful thinking. The Washington Teachers' Union recommends that District Local Education Agencies (LEAs) study this guidance. The voice of teachers needs to be at the forefront of the discussion and we must prioritize equity as we reimagine education in a post COVID-19 framework across the District of Columbia.

Reopening our schools will be seen as a symbol of our recovery and is a key to reopening our broader economy.



Washington Teachers' Union

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The WTU Reopen DC Taskforce

The WTU Reopen DC Taskforce was formed in May 2020 to advise WTU President Elizabeth Davis during her service on the Mayor's Reopen DC Committee, Subcommittee on Education and Childcare. As it became clear that each Local Education Agency (LEA) in the District of Columbia would need to develop specific guidelines for how their school system would reopen, the WTU's Taskforce grew to nearly 200 members. The Taskforce divided into seven subcommittees – Early Care & Education, Elementary Education, Middle School Education, High School Education, Opportunity Academies, Special Education, and Inner Core & Library Sciences. The recommendations outlined in this report come from their work.

The WTU would like to thank every member who served on a committee or who participated in a survey that guided this work. We'd especially like to thank the subcommittee chairs for their work bringing teacher voices to the forefront.

The Washington Teachers' Union

The Washington Teachers' Union (WTU) represents more than 5,000 active and retired teachers in Washington D.C. The WTU is dedicated to social and educational justice for the students of the District of Columbia and to improving the quality of support, resources, compensation and working conditions for the public servants and proud teachers who educate our students in D.C. Public Schools.

Washington Teachers' Union
Elizabeth A. Davis, President

Reopen DC Taskforce Committee Report – June 2020

DC Schools Play a Vital Role in our Community

The novel coronavirus and the subsequent school closures made clear that schools play an outsized role in our community — they are so much more than places to learn. Schools provide vital nutrition, physical safety, social, mental health and critical developmental supports to tens of thousands of students across the District every day. When Mayor Muriel Bowser made the decision to close our public schools and move to distance learning earlier this year, it was to protect the lives of our students, teachers, school staff and school leaders. It was the right choice. When we make the decision to reopen our schools, we must do so carefully to prevent a resurgence of the disease.

As teachers, we believe our students are only limited by the opportunities that they are provided. Our schools should be the great equalizer. Schools must be a place where students can come and learn, a place where they can rise up and achieve. Schools should be places that are safe and healthy. Unfortunately, here in the District of Columbia, we have a two-tiered system of education.

COVID-19 has exposed deep disparities across our communities. While the effects of COVID-19 on the health of racial and ethnic minority groups is still emerging; data clearly suggest a disproportionate burden of illness and death among racial and ethnic minority groups. COVID-19 has also highlighted the stark digital divide that plagues our city and our nation.

As we emerge from the public health crisis caused by COVID-19, we must utilize this opportunity to embark on reforms needed to ensure every student – regardless of their zip code or luck in the lottery – receives a high-quality, well-rounded education. We must do this while prioritizing the health of our teachers, students and communities.

Reopening our school systems safely

Based upon the recommendations made by the District of Columbia's Reopen DC Committee^{iv}, as well as information provided by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE)^v and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC)^{vi}, it is clear that our school systems, including the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), do not meet the criteria to fully reopen until a vaccine is developed and widely available.



	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
What is the nature of the pandemic?	Declining virus transmission	Only localized transmission	Sporadic transmission	Effective vaccine or cure
What is the nature of our city's activities?	Key low-risk activities with strong safeguards (e.g., parks)	Additional activities with strong safeguards (e.g., indoor dining)	Higher-risk activities, with safeguards (e.g., pools)	A "new normal" for DC, likely with all activities as close to normal as possible
How should we gather ¹¹ ?	Up to 10 people	Up to 50 people	Up to 250 people	All gatherings
Should we work remotely ¹² ?	Strongly recommended	Strongly recommended	Encouraged	New normal
Can we travel ¹² ?	Discouraged	Discouraged	Can resume	All travel

●—————●
We strongly recommend that DC's universal safeguards apply through the conclusion of Stage 3.

Reopen DC Report

Despite these recommendations, the Washington Teachers' Union is aware of the unique role that our schools play in the District's ability to reopen our broader economy. We also believe that it is critical that our students resume in-person learning as soon as it is safe, for both teachers and students, to do so. As such, we support the report's recommendations for the partial reopening of our schools and the resumption of in-person work beginning as early as Stage 2 to being the gradual reopening of our schools, if we can ensure that the health of teachers, school-based staff, our students and our communities will be protected.

Washington Teachers' Union
Elizabeth A. Davis, *President*
Reopen DC Taskforce Committee Report – June 2020

WHAT MOVING ACROSS STAGES SHOULD LOOK LIKE

ACTIVITIES AND FUNCTIONS	UNIVERSAL SAFEGUARDS			
	STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3	STAGE 4
Preschool-K-12 and adult education	Distance learning only	Schools partially reopen, starting with some schools accessible to students who might benefit most from in-person instruction (e.g., students in transitional grades, students of site-critical workers), followed by opening of all schools with blended instruction for all students who wish to attend in-person and mandatory virtual learning for those who do not. No more than 10 students per classroom and expectation of A/B schedules.		

Reopen DC Report

For the reopening of our schools to succeed across all phases of the city's plan, the input of teachers is critical in the development of plans to both resume in-person instruction and improve distance learning. The WTU assembled a taskforce of nearly 200 teacher volunteers to identify concerns and develop specific guidelines for how DCPS should reopen. The Taskforce divided into seven subcommittees – Early Care & Education, Elementary Education, Middle School Education, High School Education, Opportunity Academies, Special Education, and Inner Core & Library Sciences.

The WTU Taskforce sought to raise and answer questions such as:

- What protections need to be in place for teachers, and students, to feel protected from exposure to coronavirus as they return to in-person instruction?
- How will in-person and distance learning be balanced while ensuring teachers have the ability and resources to conduct both types of learning without suffering from burnout? How do we ensure all students receive a well-rounded education and social-emotional supports during this period?
- As we return in a hybrid approach, what are the best staffing plans for individual schools to minimize the possibility of contamination while maximizing student learning ensuring that students continue to receive the well-rounded education they deserve?

As we move forward, the District of Columbia must prioritize equity and intentionally seek to close the stark opportunity and related achievement gaps that have long plagued our city (see Appendix 1). We know this will require a reimagining of our budget and the allocation of additional resources. As we emerge from this crisis, the Washington Teachers' Union will continue our work with our city's elected leadership to re-examine the impacts of the chronic underfunding of our public school systems and to better understand the impacts the digital divide and opportunity gaps have on student achievement. In addition, it is critical that DCPS reform student and teacher evaluation systems to deemphasize high-stakes testing and to promote high quality instruction, teacher retention and professional growth. The city also needs to embark on a series of reforms to ensure all students, receive a well-rounded education regardless of their zip code or success in the lottery and to put Washington D.C.'s by-right, neighborhood schools on an equal footing with public charter schools.

Washington Teachers' Union
Elizabeth A. Davis, *President*

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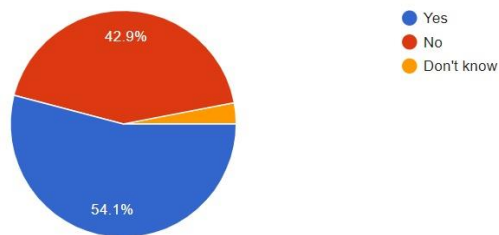
What protections need to be in place to reopen our schools?

The District's Committee to Reopen DC recommends that remote work is "strongly recommended" in Stage 1 and Stage 2 and "encouraged" during Stage 3 of the recovery. Additionally, the District's Committee to Reopen DC recommends that gatherings be significantly limited to fewer than 50 individuals during Stage 2 and no more than 250 individuals during Stage 3 of our recovery and that strong safeguards are put into place to protect the health of citizens during these phases of the recovery. These recommendations for reopening our city are seemingly at odds with the report's call for the partial reopening of our schools, including the resumption of in-person work beginning as early as Stage 2. For the reopening of our schools to begin earlier than health guidelines is problematic and it will require teachers and school-based staff to be treated as essential personnel and additional protections must be put in place to ensure their health and safety as well as the health of our students and our communities.

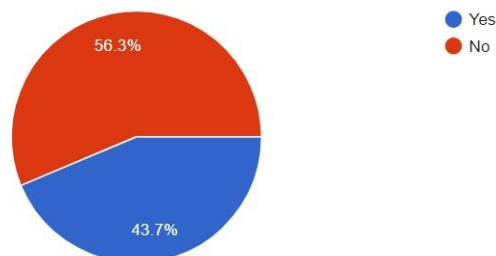
Our Teacher Workforce

Many teachers are themselves or live with someone who is at a high-risk of developing serious illness from COVID-19. According to preliminary surveys of WTU members, more than 50% of teachers are themselves or live with someone who is at a high-risk for developing severe illness from COVID-19. These factors place severe constraints on the ability of teachers to return to in-person learning. An equal number of DC educators are the primary care-giver for school-aged children. Planning must cross school communities, LEAs, and jurisdiction and involve a wide variety of stakeholders to allow for teachers to safely return to work while ensuring care for their school-aged children.

Are you or someone you live with at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19? Factors for higher risk include: People with chronic lung disease, moderate to severe asthma, serious heart conditions, immunocompromised, severe obesity (body mass index [BMI] of 40 or higher), diabetes, chronic kidney disease undergoing dialysis, or liver disease.



Do you have school-aged children for whom you are the primary care-giver?



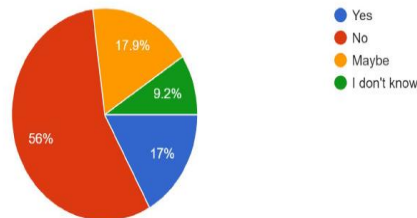
WTU Survey, preliminary findings

Our School Facilities

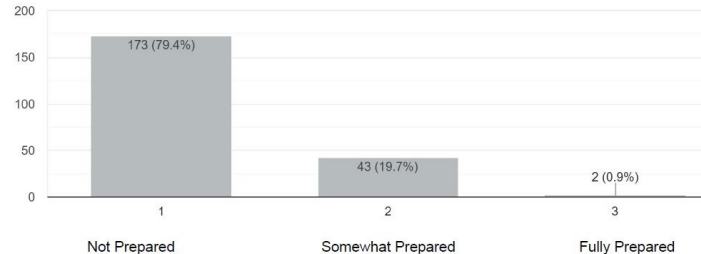
The physical condition of our school buildings and the available spaces within them are also a constraint on the District's ability to safely reopen schools to in-person learning. While the District has made substantial investments in recent years in the modernization of our schools, many school buildings remain outdated, classrooms take place in modular units in several communities, and many schools have poor, ill-functioning air circulation systems. Additionally, even during normal times, school communities regularly report shortages of cleaning supplies as well as soap for student and staff restrooms. Recommendations to have students take lunch in classrooms, to limit their movement throughout school buildings, will increase already prevalent issues with rodent and insect infestation. To prevent the spread of COVID-19, schools will need to invest in new furnishings, protective barriers, and personal protective equipment (PPE).

Given current conditions, many teachers do not feel that DCPS is prepared to re-open our schools.

Do you believe your school has enough classroom space to accommodate the 10-person-max per room guidelines, with half of students attending each day (A/B schedule)?
218 responses



How prepared do you think schools are to open in-person and ensure student and staff safety on August 31st?



WTU Survey, preliminary findings

Recommendations –

DCPS can take several concrete steps to improve the safety of teachers and school staff to allow for the resumption of in-person learning during early stages of the city's recovery from COVID-19. With all recommendations, teachers should be consulted to ensure the protections provided are adequate and do not disrupt learning. If these steps are not taken, distance learning should continue until an effective cure or vaccine is available.

- 1. Provide protection for teachers and school-based staff.** DCPS needs to ensure that teachers, staff, students and their families are protected from the exposure and spread of coronavirus by:

- a. Installing physical barriers at teacher desks and updating classroom furnishings to promote social distancing.
 - b. Providing PPE to all staff and students and developing protocols to ensure their use is consistent across all DCPS schools, by grade band.
 - i. It is recommended that those who do not agree to wear PPE or practice social distancing during Stage 1 and Stage 2 will not be allowed to participate in in-person learning.
 - ii. It is recommended that schools that are without PPE shall be immediately closed.
 - c. Consulting teachers and school-based staff in the development of individual teaching schedules.
 - i. Teachers who are at high-risk or live with someone who is at a high-risk for developing severe complications from COVID-19 shall be allowed to opt-out of returning to a classroom and conduct lessons via distance learning;
 - ii. Teachers with school-aged children or younger shall be allowed a schedule that provides for them to meet the needs of their families. To the extent possible, DCPS shall coordinate with other LEAs and neighboring jurisdictions to enact similar schedules to minimize conflicts.
 - iii. Individuals shall be eligible for reimbursement for additional childcare expenses incurred as a result of their teaching schedules not conforming to usual hours.
 - d. Treating teacher and school-based staff as essential employees and provided hazard pay during Stage 1, Stage 2, and Stage 3 of the recovery if they are asked to conduct in-person instruction.
- 2. Limit large gatherings**, consistent with DC and CDC guidelines on gatherings within school facilities at all times. These limits shall apply to the number of individuals in a school at any time.
- a. Stage 1 – Up to 10 people
 - b. Stage 2 – Up to 50 people
 - c. Stage 3 – Up to 250 people
- 3. Increased Health Care Staffing and Testing.** Ensure a licensed nurse is present at all times when students are present and that all teachers and school-based staff are frequently tested.
- a. All staff shall be administered a test by a licensed medical provider and required to test negative for the coronavirus prior to taking part in in-person learning and shall be required to be routinely tested, especially if they have been exposed to the coronavirus.
 - b. All staff and students shall be screened by a licensed health care professional daily upon entrance to a school facility, ideally outside, for signs of disease. Clear protocols need to be in place, with determinations made by health care staff, for those who have signs of illness.
 - c. All students must have a current health form on file prior to attending in-person classes.
 - d. Clear protocols shall be established to govern the entry and exit of parents, community members and guests.
 - i. Parents and caregivers who enter a building to drop-off or pick-up children shall be screened by a medical professional for signs of illness.
- 4. DCPS shall establish protocols for action if a school community is exposed to the coronavirus.**
- a. Clear protocols need to be established for timely communication with school based staff and the community in the event of an exposure.
 - b. Teachers who are exposed as a part of their regular duties and subject to a 14 day quarantine will not be required to use sick leave and will be allowed to perform other duties remotely, as health circumstances allow.
 - i. DCPS shall have a widely available pool of substitute teachers available and train substitutes in all learning platforms.

1. The WTU recommends increasing compensation made available to substitute teachers.
 2. The WTU recommends waiving barriers to recently retired teachers returning to the classroom as substitutes to increase the availability of substitutes.
 - c. Students who are exposed to coronavirus will revert to distance learning and for a period of at least 14 days.
 - d. Establish, in conjunction with the Washington Teachers' Union, protocols for when an entire school will be closed for a period of quarantine.
- 5. Consider Non-Traditional School Hours.** Concerns around the risk of exposure to the coronavirus while on public transportation for both teachers and students is a barrier to returning to school. DCPS should consider non-traditional school hours to limit the exposure for those who commute via public transportation.
- a. DCPS must work to align schedules across schools, coordinate with charter LEAs, and other jurisdictions to ensure that teachers and staff have educational options for their children.
 - i. Should teachers require childcare due to adjustments to work schedules, DCPS shall provide a subsidy and consider all options to make childcare available to employees who need it.
 - b. Schools shall establish non-traditional hours to minimize exposure while on public transportation for both teachers and students.
 - c. Schools shall stagger entry and exit times for students to minimize crowding at entrances and exits. Protocols for individual schools shall be developed, in consultation with LSATs and teachers, to govern dismissal that will not require multiple groups of students to come together in common spaces until they are picked up by caregivers.
 - d. Expand the Daytime School Parking Zone Act to ensure that all schools have adequate parking spaces for all staff.
- 6. Provide enhancements to DCPS cleaning protocols and facilities.** DCPS must ensure facilities are cleaned daily and that all protocols and cleaning schedules, for both daily cleaning and the replacement of air filters, are public and available to all teachers and school community members.
- a. All common areas must be sanitized regularly and any classroom utilized for multiple groups of students must be sanitized between groups.
 - b. Any rooms where food is provided shall be cleaned daily to prevent rodents and insect infestations.
 - c. DCPS shall ensure cleaning supplies, as well as soap and hand sanitizer, is available and it is recommended that schools that are without adequate supplies shall be immediately closed.
 - d. The WTU recommends that air filters are changed prior to reopening schools. In cases where air circulation issues have been reported, DCPS shall prioritize repairs prior to reopening a school building.
 - e. DCPS shall work with teachers to ensure classrooms are equipped with proper furnishings to promote social distancing, as required, and in the placement of temporary physical barriers around desks and work spaces as needed.

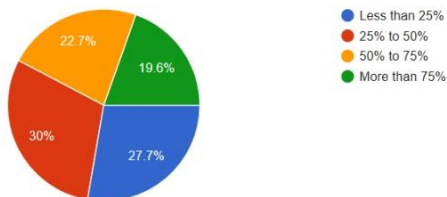
Balancing the demands of in-person and distance learning

Limits on gatherings and recommendations for partial the partial reopening of our schools through Stage 3 of the recovery indicate that not all of our city's students will return to in-person learning in the 2020-21 school year. DCPS began the development of plans for a partial reopening for summer instruction, targeting 3rd, 6th and 9th grade students. Additionally, in surveys of parents, DC Public Schools indicated that not all students will be required to attend in-person instruction at the start of the 2020-21 school year, presenting several options for a mix of in-person and distance learning. As we confront the reality of this path, DCPS needs to invest in and prepare for a hybrid approach to learning that mixes in-person and distance learning, to ensure students in all schools are able to receive a high-quality, well-rounded education.

The Digital Divide

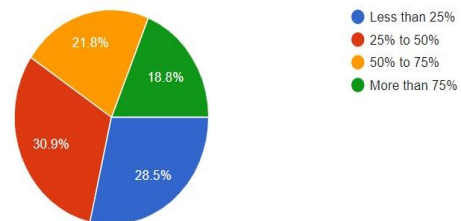
In an acknowledgement of the Digital Divide, DC Public Schools embarked on a new Empowered Learners Initiative (ELi) in 2019 – 2020 “to close the digital divide and empower every learner through technology.”^{vii} The novel coronavirus has shown that this effort needs to be accelerated. In a survey of WTU teachers conducted in early April, we reported a high percentage of students were not logging in to lessons on a regular basis, leading to efforts to expedite the delivery of computers and hotspots to students in need. It has since been reported that DCPS only distributed approximately 10,000 of the 16,400 devices purchased through the ELi effort. Unfortunately, as the year progressed, the teachers did not see any significant increase in the engagement of students in distance learning.

What percentage of your students are regularly logging in?



April 2020

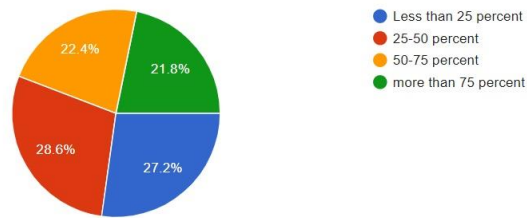
What percentage of your students were regularly logging in during the 4th Quarter?



June 2020
WTU Survey

As the DCPS closed schools in March, DCPS estimated that approximately 30% of all students needed a device.^{viii} WTU estimates indicated a higher need as we began distance learning and we continue to believe that many families struggled to access adequate and appropriate devices to fully participate in distance learning. We recognize that additional barriers also exist to student access. Many families do not have and cannot afford Wi-Fi access and many others struggle with understanding how to use the technology and access learning via websites and apps. We must look comprehensively at these issues to close the digital divide and improve student engagement.

What percentage of your students do you believe have access to the technology (computer, access to internet) needed to conduct on-line courses?



WTU Survey

High Expectations for In-person and Digital Learning

The move to distance learning raised many questions about the expectations for both students and staff. Unfortunately, the short timeline to prepare for the shift combined with inconsistent messaging from schools and DCPS central office, resulted in confusion and standards varied considerably across schools. In a survey, WTU teachers expressed an interest in ensuring that DCPS clarify a number of policies to set clear and high standards across all schools. It is critical that teacher and student voices are a part of these decisions to prevent a repeat of the challenges that occurred in the spring.

What policies does DCPS need to clarify before school starts in the fall? (Check all that apply)

Student attendance and participation	95.4%
Family accountability	75.2%
Expectations for completion of assignments	87.6%
Expectations for teacher responsibilities	83.9%
Grading	75.7%

The Washington Teachers' Union believes that all students should have access to a rigorous, well-rounded education rich in the arts and sciences, and inclusive of physical education, world language and library sciences. Students should not lose out on the opportunity to engage in these subjects, and acquire the background knowledge they need to thrive later in school and in life, whether they are engaged in in-person or in distance learning. This will require a reimagining of how teachers in the Inner Core and Library Sciences engage with their peers and with students. Teachers must be involved in these decisions.

For the academic and social-emotional needs of students to be met, DCPS will need to reimagine the staffing of our schools. Teachers will need additional flexibility, planning and professional supports to meet the needs of students. Additionally, schools will need access to additional mental and social supports, especially for those students who have been most directly impacted by COVID-19 and its impacts on their communities.

Recommendations –

1. **Teacher & LSAT engagement in development of staffing and instructional plans.** DCPS must work with teachers and staff members to design staffing and instructional plans that will balance the demands of in-person and distance education as well as meet the needs of teachers and students, protecting a student's right to a well-rounded education.
 - a. DCPS shall work with teachers and school staff to develop master schedules and teaching schedules whether they are engaged in in-person or distance learning.
 - i. Teaching schedules should be developed that minimize exposure for teachers and staff to multiple groups of students via in-person learning
 - ii. Teachers engaged in both in-person and distance learning environments will need additional planning time; work above a teachers' regular hours should qualify for administrative premium.
 1. DCPS must recognize that teachers will need additional time prepare lessons and to grade assignments in different learning environments, especially for those who are asked to provide instruction in multiple environments simultaneously.
 - iii. Class periods should not be extended beyond normal lengths; breaks shall be provided to students and physical exercise encouraged.
 - b. Ensure that all students continue to receive a well-rounded education that includes access to all inner-core courses and requires collaboration across disciplines.
 - c. Teachers who are leading distance learning courses, should teach no more than 4 hours per day and a break of 15-30 should be provided between classes;
 - i. Teachers would retain their requirement of 6 hours "work time" per day, but be provided flexibility to work with whole group, small group, and contact families.
 - ii. Teachers who are engaged in distance learning should be given flexibility to meet their students' needs. We must recognize that teachers will spend additional time communicating with families during periods of distance learning.
 - d. Staffing plans must distribute workloads equitably and ensuring teacher and staff well-being is considered.
2. **Increase socio-emotional programming and resources.** DCPS shall increase access to social-emotional programming to support the needs of teachers, school-based staff and students.
3. **Make distance learning support and supplies available to all students and staff.** DCPS shall make computers or an age-appropriate device available to all students and staff to facilitate distance learning. This will require an increased investment in FY2021 of approximately \$11 million^{ix} to allow for the purchase of additional devices.
 - a. DCPS shall consult with teachers to determine appropriate distance learning platforms for various grade levels and courses.
 - i. DCPS shall provide additional, interactive, professional development to teachers who need support in the adoption of new distance learning tools and platforms.
 - b. Schools should hold an on-line orientation for students engaging in distance learning, providing training for students and families on platforms being utilized by the District and including online etiquette and expectations for attendance and assignments.
 - i. DCPS shall provide user guides and technical support for students and families, in multiple languages.
 - ii. A help center for students with technical or software problems should be available.
 - c. For some students and grades, non-technology supplies, including paper, crayons and other educational supplies will need to be made available to families.
 - d. DC shall also invest in bridging access to Wi-Fi access for at-risk communities.^x

Washington Teachers' Union
Elizabeth A. Davis, *President*

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4. **Grading, attendance, and participation.** DCPS must set high standards for students, ensuring that all students understand that attendance and timely submission of required work is required.
 - a. DCPS shall adopt attendance guidelines for both in-person and remote learning environments and establish clear protocols for those who do not abide by those guidelines.
 - b. Course rosters must be stable, allowing teachers to build relationships with their students and classroom, both in-person and remote, expectations.
 - i. A family's decision to enroll in in-person or distance learning, will be set until the end of the term unless the health concerns at the district or individual school change.
 - c. DCPS shall work with teachers to establish uniform course expectations regarding grading policies, procedures, and standards, as appropriate for different grades and courses.
 - d. Protocols need to be developed for students who are transitioning between in-person and distance environments, to ensure attendance, participation and submission of assignments.
5. **Improve services for special education students.** DCPS must ensure that special education students are receiving a Free and Appropriate Public Education.
 - a. DCPS shall ensure students receive SPED/504 accommodations.
 - b. DCPS shall ensure special education teachers have caseloads that do not exceed standards negotiated with the Washington Teachers' Union and that special education teachers are not utilized for additional duties that interfere with their ability to provide services to the students on their caseloads.
 - c. DCPS shall invest in the appropriate technology infrastructure to streamline reporting for special education students and complete evaluations of referrals in a timely manner.
6. **Suspend IMPACT and high-stakes testing.** The WTU believes that high stakes testing and evaluations, utilized for teacher and school accountability, should be ended until at least one year after the District enters Stage 4 of the recovery.

Treat Different School Environments Differently

No two learning environments are the same. While all teachers and students should adhere to the same high expectations, it is important to recognize the differences among learning environments. The learning environments for Early Childhood Education, Elementary Schools, Middle Schools, High Schools, and Opportunity Academies need to be structured differently to best meet the needs of the students in those settings.

Early Childhood Education & Elementary Education

Planning to reopen DCPS ECE campuses and elementary schools needs to take into account the specific needs, development and behavior of younger students. Strict social distancing requirements and adherence to CDC guidelines will not be possible for all ages of students for extended periods of time and may promote militant –type environments that are not appropriate for young learners, especially students already exposed to ACEs. Schools will need to have different expectations and schedules in place for ECE students, K-2 grade classrooms and 3-5 grade classrooms. School level planning must ensure that students are exposed to a full educational experience, including Inner Core classes.

Recommendations -

- Ensuring consistent scheduling is important for all grade bands. However, the length of daily instruction for students will need to vary by grade band within ECE and Elementary Education environments and whether instruction is occurring in-person or via distance learning.
 - A/B scheduling may expose more students and staff to the coronavirus and effective protocols need to be put into place between groups of students entering a classroom or using educational supplies.
- Shifts between in-person and distance learning environments should be limited.
 - Transitions will result in the need to reinforce classroom expectations and routines. The shift in instructional mode will require teachers to reset classroom norms, whether in-person or remote.
 - Attend in-person learning one to two times per week may have limited benefit as a great deal of time will be needed to reestablish classroom norms, unless these days are primarily used as remedial instructional days or for social emotional learning.
 - It may be necessary to group students by ability level rather than grade for effective interventions during limited in-person learning experiences.
- DCPS needs to provide clarity for the development of plans on instructional planning and implementation. Many classes will not be able to follow unit plan and scope and sequence and teachers will require additional time and support to develop effective lesson plans, especially if they are responsible for both in-person and distance lessons.
- DCPS needs to provide clear expectations for inner core, library media specialists, and departmentalized educators as they teach across grade bands. Including these educators in in-person learning may dramatically increase their risk for exposure during early stages of a school's reopening; however, their engagement with students is critical to maintaining a well-rounded educational environment for students.

Washington Teachers' Union
Elizabeth A. Davis, *President*

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- As DCPS considers alternate schedules, including staggered start and end times to the school day, additional staff will be required, especially in departmentalized grades. Staffing is also a concern for in-person learning should a high percentage of students opt to return to in-person environments early in the recovery.
- Clear communication and expectations, aligned with other similar learning environments, is required, both for in-person and distance learning environments.

WTU Elementary Task Force collected data from 769 ECE and elementary educators and staff members from schools within all wards and focus groups. [WTU Elementary Survey Data](#)

Middle & High School Education

At the middle and high school level, it is important to ensure students remain on track to graduation and school level planning must ensure that students are exposed to a full educational experience, including Inner Core classes and all graduation requirements.

Recommendations -

- School communities, teachers and LSATs, should have a voice in their schedule. Schools may consider moving back to the 4x4 schedule to simplify and lessen the number of classes being taken at once for balancing purposes or maintain A/B scheduling.
 - At the high school level, any courses that have been offered and are in the master schedule should be continued either virtually or in person, as appropriate.
 - The school's schedule needs to be flexible to accommodate both distance learning and in-person learning and may not be the same in both environments.
 - Some classes could meet more effectively in one environment or the other and consideration should be given to whether or not each class and teacher requires both in-person and remote options.
- DCPS should not eliminate or reduce the availability of elected classes during the middle years. These courses, which include visual art, music, PE (including dance), theatre arts, library, robotics and world languages, are critical to a students' development and preparation for high school.
 - In the middle grades, students who lack access to these courses will be placed at a disadvantage as they enter high school, especially in courses, including World Languages, for which they are eligible for credit towards graduation.
- Teachers should be encouraged to continue clubs and other extracurricular activities in both in-person, when applicable, and remote environments. Flexibility and stipends for this work should be made available.
- Training for Teachers and staff for online synchronized learning; usage of the same online platforms for all students; physical space for multiple classes to occur in a school as large as Wilson; making sure all students are receiving the same educational curriculum at the same pace regardless if they are at home or in school.

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- DCPS should set clear, and high, expectations for student engagement and grading.
 - DCPS shall lower the Extra Credit percentage allowing students to only earn up to 5% extra credit towards overall term grade.
 - Due Dates shall be clear and students should only have up to 10 days, past a due date, to turn in a late assignment.
 - Guidelines must be exceptionally clear for students and caregivers.
- Student Attendance should take into account a wide variety of forms of engagement: video conference, submitted work, (badges in Canvas). Rather than require daily attendance, for students engaged in distance learning, students must complete at least 60% of the assignments (like an FA) to pass a course.

Opportunity Academies

Opportunity Academies provide alternate settings to provide services to middle and high school students who have not found success in the traditional school environments. These learning environments require unique supports for students.

Recommendations -

- The importance of having medical staff on-site is critical for the opportunity academies due to the transient nature of their students. Additionally, it is recommended that DCPS work closely with the Department of Health to ensure contact tracing is available and the school is notified in the event a student or staff member is exposed.
- Utilize a hybrid instructional model that focuses distance and in-seat learning with the most challenged, tier two-three student receiving in seat instruction.
- Continue to use or incorporate a co-teaching model and align teacher schedules to those of students, to minimize exposure for both groups.
 - Limit the amount of time students and teachers are only in the building to no more than four hours per day.
 - Limit the time teachers are in the building rotating between a teacher of record and a co-teacher.
- Incorporate a staggered schedule with less than 50% of the subject areas in the building at one time and limit the number of students to no more than six students per room to receive in seat instruction per subject area.
 - Students shall be notified and held accountable for attendance, including full participation in classes.
- Embrace the use of distance learning platforms
 - Conduct live lessons that will be recorded for student accessibility.
 - Ensure students are aware of the proper format and submission requirements for all work.
 - Allow schools to continue using the Summit learning platform (curriculum, goals, etc.), which has been effective in engaging and teaching opportunity academy students, or select another platform with the approval of DCPS.
- DCPS shall work to stabilize enrollment, providing support for the opportunity academies. Opportunity Academies receive students throughout the year. Student transitions should be limited to each quarter so that the students can be properly on-boarded for that school's hybrid model.

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- DCPS shall ensure accommodations or additions to DCMRA chapter 25 are made for students in the Opportunity Academies.
- Opportunity Academies should continue to make childcare available during times students are attending in-person courses. Evening classes should continue to be made available for students who cannot attend school during traditional hours.

Inner Core & Librarians

During this time of crisis, we should not be limiting the experiences of our students. It is critical that students continue to receive a world-class education in the arts, humanities, and sciences. We also must adhere to federal and local requirements for special education students and programming. Every student shall receive a well-rounded education designed to prepare them for success in elementary, middle and high school and beyond.

Recommendations –

- All students must continue to receive instruction in traditional courses as these classes are needed to support digital citizenship, fair use laws, research methods and graduation requirements. These staff also support students' research for college options, creation of academic resumes/biographies, scholarship research and submission.
- Library Media Specialists and Inner Core Teachers must be included in all training of DCPS digital applications, tools and programs and clear protocols need to be established for how Librarians and Inner Core teachers are expected to deliver instruction with limited space restrictions.
- Protocols shall be established for library media specialists and inner core teachers to ensure limited exposure to coronavirus if they are required to push into classrooms. They shall be provided with an opportunity and supplies to clean and sanitize any supplies that are needed for multiple groups of students.
- Libraries and gymnasiums, and other common facilities, shall not be repurposed as general education spaces in a manner that will undermine the access of students to these courses.
- If the library media specialist must 'push in' to classrooms for instruction, protocols need to be established for the delivery of books will continue to support the school's literacy program, retrieving / reshelving books and safety of the employees and students.

Special Education

As DCPS develops plans for reopening our schools, special education students will require a wide spectrum of additional programs and services. Social distancing may not be possible for all students and it will look remarkably different for others. DCPS must consider what FAPE looks like within various levels/programs of Special Education and ensure that IDEA and DCMR requirements are met.

Recommendations –

- Consider the varying degrees of needs of students. Students who are returning should be students who can do tasks independently; such as, ensuring the student can keep a mask on, wash their hands and

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take care of their toileting needs. Students who require significant physical prompting for daily living skills (toileting, feeding, and transitions) should return in later phases.

- Clear protocols need to be developed for students who:
 - have IEPs that require physical prompting.
 - have sensory issues and spit or play with their saliva to satisfy sensory needs; how will that be addressed?
- DCPS shall consider the service model. Special education teachers must be given specific guidance as to what services look like and in what environments they'll be able to "push in" given strict class size limits and social distancing requirements.
 - RSP's usually have to pull students in groups; if students are not to leave their individual learning spaces will that mean that all service times need to be administered individually for all kids on the caseload which for some providers can reach upwards of seventy students.
 - DCPS shall develop guidance on specialty programs, including home and hospital.
- DCPS shall consider altered class-size/structure for self-contained programs and staffing for specific programs.
 - CES / BES / ILS / Medically fragile classrooms should have reduced class sizes BELOW the 8-10 student proposed limit. The WTU proposes a 50% capacity or less to take into account the needs of the students and ensure staff to student ratio is adequate for things like increased hand washing breaks, etc. that involve out-of-class transitions, etc. and potentially allow for dedicating 1 staff person for every 1-2 students in the room to minimize contacts during things like toileting, meals, 1:1 instruction, etc.
 - Students who have underlying health conditions or compromised immune systems, or who live with a family member with these risks, shall be encouraged to attend school virtually.
- DCPS shall develop, with input from educators, protocols for how staff shall respond to students who require restraints due to unsafe behaviors as well as protocols for students who may require physical comfort during a meltdown.
- Improve data systems and invest in resources needed to track services, including IEP hours, evaluations and other services provided. Teachers are currently being asked to document hours in 2-4 different ways for building admin, DSI, SEDS and others.
 - Data systems need to be updated to allow for digital signatures.
- Support teachers in managing their workload, provides additional time for planning and paperwork, as well as increased flexibility to meet with students outside of traditional hours and to conduct assessments and programming, including IEP evaluations, virtually when appropriate.
 - DCPS shall consult teachers to develop metrics for the evaluation of SPED teachers.
- Improved transportation. DCPS needs to work closely with OSSE DOT to adopt a plan for transportation that meets social distancing requirements.
- DCPS shall provide professional development to support teachers who conduct distance learning lessons for students with Special Needs and from DCPS Counsel on providing FAPE in a time of distance learning.

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Conclusions

Washington's teachers are committed to serving our students, providing them a rich, well-rounded education that prepares them for success in college and the workforce. The WTU supports a return to in-person learning, in a manner that protects the health of our teachers, school-based staff, students and our communities. However, given the realities around the spread of the coronavirus and the dangers of COVID-19, we believe that a hybrid learning environment – including both in-person and distance learning – will occur in the 2020-2021 school year, with a possibility that renewed outbreaks of COVID-19 will require a full transition to distance learning. As such, the District of Columbia must also prioritize investments to support distance learning and close the Digital Divide and achievement gaps that plague our city.

The recommendations contained in this report are from teachers who will be in our schools and educating our city's students. As we move forward with plans to reopen our schools, resuming in-person instruction, these individuals will be on the front lines and will be potentially exposed to the coronavirus. The health of our teacher workforce is critical to their ability to provide instruction to our students.

The Washington Teachers' Union is grateful to our teachers for the preparation of these recommendations. We look forward to working with city leaders and DC Public Schools to ensure that our students can thrive during the COVID-19 pandemic - both in-person and via distance learning. It is critical that we protect our teachers and school-based staff to ensure that learning can continue uninterrupted and to prevent future outbreaks of COVID-19.

Appendix 1.

District of Columbia PARCC Results	State ELA % 4+				4-year Growth
	2016	2017	2018	2019	
All Students	26.7%	30.5%	33.3%	37.1%	10.4%
White	74.3%	82.0%	82.1%	85.0%	10.7%
Black	19.3%	22.0%	24.7%	27.8%	8.5%
Hispanic	24.7%	28.9%	32.0%	37.3%	12.6%
Asian	55.7%	66.2%	71.6%	74.0%	18.3%
At-Risk	13.2%	15.8%	18.4%	21.1%	7.9%
English Learners	13.8%	1.5%	18.8%	19.7%	5.9%
Students with Disabilities	5.4%	4.8%	5.7%	7.9%	2.5%

PARCC Scores	State Math % 4+				4-year Growth
	2016	2017	2018	2019	
All Students	24.8%	26.9%	29.4%	30.5%	5.7%
White	71.0%	75.5%	78.8%	78.8%	7.8%
Black	17.4%	18.6%	20.7%	21.1%	3.7%
Hispanic	22.0%	28.2%	28.2%	30.5%	8.5%
Asian	59.7%	64.5%	69.8%	69.4%	9.7%
At-Risk	12.9%	14.2%	15.7%	16.3%	3.4%
English Learners	18.5%	21.2%	20.9%	22.7%	4.2%
Students with Disabilities	6.4%	5.3%	6.4%	7.2%	0.8%

Source: <https://osse.dc.gov/parcc>

ⁱ <https://coronavirus.dc.gov/reopendc>

ⁱⁱ <https://osse.dc.gov/page/covid-19-related-osse-guidance-documents>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/covid19_reopen-america-schools.pdf

^{iv} <https://coronavirus.dc.gov/reopendc>

^v https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/Policy%20Guidance%20for%20Re-opening%20Schools%20-%20COVID-19%20Recovery%20Period%206.3.20.pdf

^{vi} <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/guidance-for-schools.html>

^{vii} <https://dcps.dc.gov/page/empowered-learners-initiative-eli-0>

^{viii} <https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/dcps-looks-at-offering-laptops-to-students-while-classes-are-online-during-coronavirus/65-addbf317-5cc6-4cc1-ad8b-2822611df92e>

^{ix} <https://thedcline.org/2020/01/21/school-tech-advocates-to-mayor-follow-through-on-fixing-technology-in-dc-public-schools/>

^x <https://statescoop.com/d-c-nonprofits-push-back-against-digital-equity-budget-cuts/>