



Washington Teachers' Union

Amplifying the Voice of DC Teachers

Elizabeth A. Davis, President

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COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE & COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Return to In-person Instruction in DC Public Schools

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Testimony of

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Good afternoon. I am Elizabeth Davis, President of the Washington Teachers' Union (WTU). The WTU represents 5,000 active and retired teachers. We are 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.

As I begin this afternoon, I'd be remiss if I didn't take a moment to mention the opportunity gaps that continue to plague our schools. Many students in our city don't have access to a librarian. Many students don't have access to Algebra or Geometry. Many do not receive the same education in social studies or the Arts as their peers in other parts of the city. While the health pandemic has brought renewed attention to the Digital Divide, it has long been a daily obstacle for many of our students. Closing the opportunity gaps that plague our school systems and the resulting achievement gaps (see Appendix 1) must be our daily focus.

I am a teacher. I believe our students are only limited by the opportunities that we provide them. The past year has been difficult for us all. I am immensely proud of our teachers who have opened their homes to students and who have spent countless hours learning new technology and preparing to make their distance classes engaging for their students. Yet, we know that many teachers have struggled to adapt to distance learning. Many students have also struggled. We all yearn for a return to the classroom.

There are few topics more important for our city and our communities than how we safely reopen our schools. While I recognize that time is limited today and that we all have to compromise due to the health pandemic, it was disappointing to see that very few of those invited to speak today represent those on the front lines, in our school buildings. It's also unclear how individuals were selected for today's hearing. We hope the Council will make available the full list of those who signed up and release any records relating to how individuals were selected. It is critical that the process is transparent and open. All perspectives must be considered on this important topic.

As educators, the members of the Washington Teachers' Union want to return to our classrooms and welcome our students back into schools as soon as it's safe. However, the WTU's top priority has been and must continue to be the health of our students and our communities.

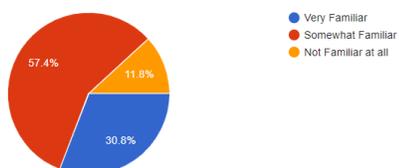
According to the CDC, the body of evidence is growing that children of all ages are susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 infection and, contrary to early reports, plays a role in the transmission of this deadly disease. We also know that many of our students travel often great distances – another example of the inequity in our educational landscape – on public transportation to attend school. Our first priority must be the health of these students and the communities that they live in, which have already been hit disproportionately hard by this deadly disease. The decision to close our schools last March was difficult but it was also the right choice. The loss of a loved one and the trauma it would cause is much more significant than the learning loss that some students will experience. Our teachers will help our students regain the ground that they've lost. They cannot replace a loved one.

As we look forward to reopening our schools, information and trust are essential. We've heard the Mayor and Chancellor repeatedly refer to the hundreds of hours spent in negotiations with Union partners. This is simply not true. Negotiations with DCPS have focused on health and safety issues; we've received precious few details from the DCPS team about reopening plans. In fact, we've learned of plans to open CARE Classrooms and resume in-person learning from the Chancellor's press conferences and, to date, we have not received detailed information on how many students have expressed interest in returning to in-person classrooms nor have

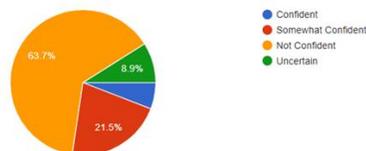
Union partners been involved in detailed conversations about staffing plans to accommodate their return.

Two weeks ago, we asked if teachers were familiar with DCPS's plans to open CARE Classrooms. Only 30% of respondents indicated that they were "very familiar" with DCPS's plans. If individuals are not familiar with and comfortable with DCPS's plans, they will not embrace them. We also asked our members about DCPS's plans to reopen CARE Classrooms in our schools. Nearly 64% of more than 1,200 respondents stated that they were "not confident" that the DCPS Facility Checklist was comprehensive and that DCPS would implement all agreed upon repairs/maintenance and provide the PPE as outlined in the checklist.

DC Public Schools is planning to reopen CARE Classrooms for up to 600 students at 35 schools on Nov 18. How familiar are you with the CARE Classroom model?
1,210 responses



Prior to reopening CARE Classrooms, DCPS has agreed with the WTU that school buildings must complete a facility checklist. Do you have confidence that the Checklist is comprehensive and that DCPS will implement all agreed upon repairs/maintenance and provide the PPE as outlined in the checklist?
1,210 responses



These two data points indicate that DCPS has failed to successfully engage their workforce and build trust in their plan. We cannot successfully reopen our schools via press release. Employees and our school communities need to be engaged in the development of reopening plans and empowered to ask questions and raise their concerns.

As we move forward to consider how to safely reopen our schools, I believe we must center around three principles – (1) Clean Air and Safe Classrooms; (2) Ensuring Equity and Minimizing Disruptions to Learning; and (3) Ensuring Stakeholders have a Seat at the Table.

Clean Air and Safe Classrooms.

The Washington Teachers' Union has been negotiating with DC Public Schools for a "[Building Readiness Checklist](#)." The idea is to provide a common, baseline of repairs and investments that need to be complete prior to our schools reopening for in-person classes. We, generally, believe that if an independent third-party verifies that all elements of the checklist are in place that a school facility meets the baseline to reopen. However, we continue to run into several roadblocks put forward by DCPS in implementing this concept.

First, is a requirement that Local School Advisory Teams (LSATs) inspect buildings to ensure all required elements of the checklist are complete. The WTU has heard from many school communities that portions of buildings were not open for their tour, that classrooms were not set up, and that work orders, including for HVAC units, had not been completed when their LSAT tour was conducted. Despite requests, DCPS has refused to reschedule these tours. While we do not believe that educators and parents have the technical knowledge to make the decision on whether or not a school building is safe, we do believe that no building should be opened prior to them seeing, with their own eyes, that promised work is complete.

Additionally, DCPS has so far failed to share detailed information on the HVAC systems in each and every school. While we appreciate the purchase of air filters and air purifiers by DCPS, they only work if air is flowing through them. Thus, it's critical to our safety that our HVAC systems

are working properly. It is our understanding that DCPS has hired a contractor to inspect HVAC systems. However, DCPS has not shared publicly the results of those inspections. Nor has DCPS made available – despite requests from the Council – a detailed list of repairs to HVAC systems that have been completed across our communities. The WTU has heard from experts that we should be striving for an air exchange rate approaching 25-30 Cubic Feet Per Minute (CFM) per room occupant. We don't know what level of air flow DCPS is striving for and considers adequate, let alone if our buildings are meeting that threshold. This is information that should be available to parents, who can then utilize it to make determinations as to whether or not they feel safe returning to a school environment.

I have one additional point on the checklists. The WTU has heard from our colleagues from the DC Nurses Association that the supply of N-95 masks is not sufficient. We encourage the Council to work directly with the school nurses to hear their concerns and ensure they're addressed prior to the expansion of reopening plans. I'm sure that other Union leaders also have concerns that they'd be willing to share.

Ensure Equity and Minimize Disruptions to Learning.

The second principle our reopen plans should embrace is equity. We must also ensure that no student is harmed by the reopening plans.

Under the proposed plans to restart in-person learning last month, of the approximately 51,000 DC Public Schools (DCPS) students, just 7,000 would have received in-person. The remainder of the city's 44,000 students would have been in larger classes and seen librarians, counselors, technology coordinators and others pulled out of their schools to supervise – not instruct – students in CARE Classrooms. Among the elementary school students, more than 21,000 elementary students will continue distance learning; many of these students will have different teachers and be in classes of up to 40 students. The disruption to elementary students' schedules and classroom routines, as well as the removal of supports for middle and high school students, will cause harm to students. We need to ensure stability and ensure that proposed plans do not disrupt the positive things happening currently across our city to better serve a select few.

The District's plan revealed last month also fails to deliver on its promise to provide support to those who need it the most, providing much more capacity for at-risk students than needed in Ward 3 while meeting a fraction of the demand in Wards 7 & 8.

Stakeholders are united that the plan proposed earlier this fall failed to meet our city's needs. WTU Members express "No Confidence" in DCPS plan to reopen schools, citing disruption to student learning and lack of clarity in safety protocols. DC's Principals, through the Council of School Officers, expressed their concerns about the Mayor's Plan to reopen schools to in-person learning in an Open Letter to the Chancellor. And the Local School Advisory Team (LSAT) Assembly also came together, representing parent leaders from all eight Wards, to oppose the Mayor's plan. As we look forward we can and must do better.

Ward	# in-person seats	Gr PK-5 At-risk enroll	% that could be served	Rank
Ward 1	510	1257	41%	#5
Ward 2	445	502	89%	#2
Ward 3	600	247	243%	#1
Ward 4	1010	2583	39%	#6
Ward 5	595	1362	44%	#4
Ward 6	1190	2118	56%	#3
Ward 7	1020	2671	38%	#7
Ward 8	1190	3934	30%	#8

A new plan must start with data. Today, as I sit here, I do not have information on the number of students who have expressed an interest in returning to in-person learning. Nor do I have

information on the number of teachers DCPS would need to facilitate a return to in-person learning. Nor can I tell you which of our students need the most support.

As we've started down this path, we've assumed that homeless, special ed, ELL, and other special populations of students need to return first. While the WTU doesn't necessarily disagree, we do wonder if there is data available to better target the individual students who need support the most. We believe that DCPS should share results of parent surveys and data on students to work with local school communities to better identify those students who would benefit the most from additional supports and work to bring them back into our school buildings first.

We must also ensure that we're not taking resources from one group of students to support another. No student should have resources pulled from their school without an informed, public debate and the engagement of the LSAT. We made promises to our students that they would have college counselors, social workers, librarians. We cannot pull these individuals from their current duties to support other students. That's not just and it will cause irreparable harm to our students and our school communities.

A seat at the table.

The final principle we must embrace is community engagement. This is one of DCPS' strategic priorities outlined in the Capital Commitment. However, to date, we've generally learned of DCPS plans via press conferences. And, when details are provided, there are many unanswered questions about how the plans will be implemented at the local school level. This is not "engagement" by any definition. To successfully move forward, this approach needs to change. Principals, Teachers, and Parents must be engaged and have a real voice in planning and in determining how to safely reopen our schools.

Last week, DCPS proposed a new "Community Corps" to provide local school input into reopening plans. This is a positive step towards engagement. However, we are deeply concerned that DCPS is not utilizing the established Local School Advisory Teams (LSATs) to advise school and DCPS leaders on reopening plans. These organizations are elected by their local school stakeholders and are covered under Open Meetings Act regulations. It seems odd that DCPS is usurping the democratically elected bodies to appoint yet another group of stakeholders. The LSAT members should be meeting regularly throughout the school year, they should be familiar with the Local School Comprehensive Plan and the needs of their school community. This is the group that should be meeting to advise the principals, as stated in their mission.

Concluding Thoughts

Our public schools should be the great equalizer. Our schools must be a place where students can come and learn, a place where they can rise up and achieve. The Washington Teachers' Union encourages the Council to exercise its oversight authority and require DCPS to develop a reopening plan with all stakeholders present to ensure safety is the top priority and ensure we reach those who have struggled the most with the transition to distance education. We hope that you will require DCPS to share real data about demand for in-person learning as well as establish health metrics and reporting standards for CARE Classrooms and any additional in-person learning opportunities that are launched in the coming months.

Thank you for your attention. I'd be happy to answer any questions.

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>