



Washington Teachers' Union

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Council of the District of Columbia Committee of the Whole Public Oversight Roundtable

Re-Opening District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and District of Columbia Public
Charter Schools (DCPCS) for School Year 2021-2022

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Testimony of

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Good afternoon. I am Jacqueline Pogue Lyons, President of the Washington Teachers' Union (WTU). I have taught in public schools across Washington, D.C. for twenty-eight years; my last teaching assignment was as a kindergarten teacher in Savoy Elementary. As president of the WTU, I am committed to fighting for social and educational justice for the students of the District of Columbia as well as the well-being of District teachers.

Everyone is anxious for schools to reopen this fall. After more than a year of being away from our school buildings because of the public health pandemic, it's imperative that students and teachers get back to school.

Our schools must fully reopen.

But my worst fear is that we fail to protect our youths and our community from the still-deadly coronavirus, especially with the surge of the Delta variant and the emerging Epsilon variant of the disease in our communities. We must ensure protections are in place to prevent students from being exposed and potentially carrying the disease back into their family. And, we must also prevent disruptions to learning, including when a student is exposed to the virus and will be required to quarantine at home. This is hard on everyone – the student, their families, and our teachers – and it creates tremendous disruptions to learning and student mental health. The last thing that educators want to do is see a student sent home, or for a classroom or our schools close again.

Today, as I sit here before you, I do not believe that we have done enough to protect our students from the coronavirus. We can do more to help prevent exposure in our schools.

Last December, under the leadership of President Elizabeth Davis, the WTU and DCPS agreed to a [Memorandum of Agreement \(MOA\)](#) and a [facility readiness check-list](#) designed to outline protections for students and school -based staff. The agreement laid out the framework that allowed our city to successfully return to in-person learning in February. It provided clarity to students and families regarding the protections that would be put into place, specifically around social distancing, personal protective equipment (PPE), and air quality. It also outlined protections for our workforce, ensuring their rights if they were exposed to COVID-19.

The MOA called for Local School Advisory Teams (LSATs) to play a significant role in verifying that conditions in our schools were safe. This was done to ensure communities were engaged and that we built trust among parents and students to help us bring families back into our school buildings. We'd hoped that this would serve as a template for plans moving forward into the 2021-2022 school year.

The WTU was disappointed that DCPS announced reopening guidelines for schools in early June prior to engaging their Union partners and community members in discussions concerning the health and safety conditions required for reopening schools safely for the 2021-2022 school year. The proposal put forward by DCPS in early June fails to adhere to the latest Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in Kindergarten (K)-12 Schools from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), which includes social distancing of at least 3 feet for unvaccinated populations and 6 feet for students who are unable to wear a mask (ie, while eating). DCPS has also continually failed to share detailed air quality data about our school buildings.

Under District Law, matters related to health and safety of educators are negotiable and the Washington Teachers' Union first approached DCPS about opening negotiations for the 2021-2022 school year in March. Unfortunately, DCPS failed to agree to come to the table until mid-June. When DCPS did come to the table, the WTU quickly provided a detailed proposal, adhering to CDC guidelines. Yet, three weeks after providing that initial document to DC Public Schools, we're still waiting on their response.

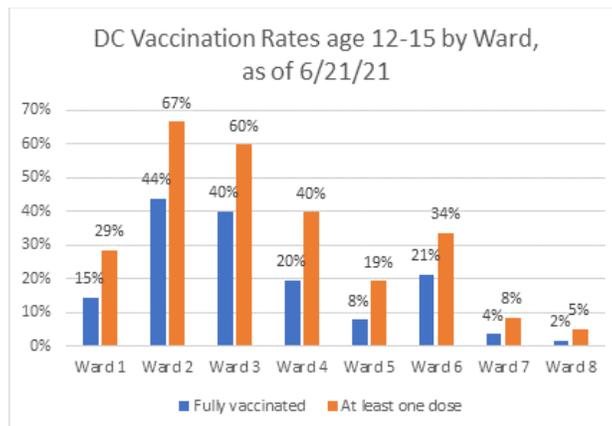
The proposal put forward by the WTU ensures social distancing and mask wearing, to protect our students and staff. It mandates that DCPS ensure safe air and water in our school buildings, and publish

detailed data to verify the safety of our school facilities. And, it contains protections for teachers who are exposed to COVID-19 while at work. While I do not want to break the spirit of confidentiality around the negotiations, I do want to emphasize a few points.

First, we believe it is imperative that DCPS provide acceptable air quality, as defined by the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers standard 62.1-2019, and share detailed air quality reports with the public. Outside of being vaccinated, this is the most critical protection that we can have in place to both protect the health of our students and ensure families are confident in the improvements made in air quality. DCPS should be required to install and continuously monitor the air quality of all school buildings, making the data publicly accessible.

Second, DCPS must ensure that schools meet social distancing requirements of a minimum of 3' for unvaccinated individuals and 6' for unvaccinated individuals when they cannot wear a mask (ie, during lunch). This requires a detailed analysis of class size to classroom space and may necessitate the hiring of additional teaching staff in certain schools to allow for social distancing. The WTU has suggested that DCPS cohort students where possible and stagger entry and dismissal times.

We must remember that when we reopen our schools in August, no student under the age of 12 will be fully vaccinated. Vaccination rates are particularly low for kids ages 12 to 15 in Wards 7 and 8, where only 8 and 5 percent, respectively, have received even one dose of the vaccine. This matters for every school community because of the extreme mobility of our student population — only about 27 percent of D.C. students attend their neighborhood school. Students who commute by bus and Metro risk being exposed to the virus and can carry it into their schools and communities.



Beyond obvious health concerns, disparities among who is vaccinated will impact who is required to quarantine at home after potential exposure. Students living in Wards 2 and 3 will have better access to in-person learning than students living in Wards 7 & 8. By mandating social distancing, we can greatly reduce the number of exposures and the disparities that will result from the vaccination gap.

In addition to the health and safety concerns, the WTU is committed to prioritizing efforts to help students regain lost learning. We've learned a lot from the past year including that simultaneously learning - where a single teacher is instructing students both in-person and via distance learning platforms - does not work. In these situations, neither group of students receives the attention that they deserve. We hope that DCPS will ban this practice, putting the interests of students first, as we return to our classrooms in the fall.

The WTU also hopes that you will reconsider and ask DCPS to invest in proven solutions to close gaps, including school librarians. Relationships are important for students as they return to schools and librarians are shown to be among the most effective investment to close literacy gaps. We hope you'll

require DCPS to restore \$3.5m to the FY2022 budget to ensure that every school has a full-time librarian before you adopt a final budget for the 2021-2022 school year.

And, finally, as the city invests in high-dosage tutoring as a key element of your strategy to close literacy gaps, I, again, call for the Council to hold an oversight hearing on the District's *growing* literacy gaps (See Appendix 1). Nearly five years ago, in the Capital Commitment: 2017-2022, DCPS set a goal of ensuring **100 percent** of K-2 students are reading on or above grade level. We've fallen terribly short of this goal and as we seek to ensure students recover lost learning, we must ensure that we're investing in the right programs and implementing those programs with fidelity so that we can achieve our goals.

The WTU recognizes the challenges that COVID-19 has created. We view this coming year as an opportunity to Reopen Better by investing in educators to reduce class size and to implement innovative, research based models of education. I hope that you'll continue to work with us to ensure that the voices of educators are heard in debates that will shape the direction of our recovery and ensure equitable opportunity for all students.

I'd like to thank you for taking time to listen to me today. 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>