

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS (DCPS)**



Joint Public Hearing  
on  
“Distance Learning in DC Public and Public Charter Schools”

Testimony of  
Dr. Lewis D. Ferebee, Ed.D.  
Chancellor  
District of Columbia Public Schools

Before the  
Council of the District of Columbia  
Committee of the Whole  
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairperson  
and  
Committee on Education  
The Honorable David Grosso, Councilmember

October 2, 2020  
Live via Zoom Video Conference Broadcast



Good afternoon Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, members of the Committees, and staff. I am Dr. Lewis D. Ferebee, Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today and discuss DCPS' recent work to ReOpen Strong with Learning at Home. I would like to start by thanking Mayor Bowser for her continued support of DCPS and strong stewardship during the public health emergency. With her leadership, DCPS continues to ensure that the health, safety, and well-being of our students, staff, families, and community remain our top priority.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted our entire nation, and especially our schools, in an unprecedented manner. This past spring, the DCPS community went above and beyond to support students and families with learning from home. Based on our experience over the last six months, we have learned the importance of adaptability and partnership to ensure a strong reopening this fall. I am proud of the work of teachers, staff, and community members who have redefined learning by transferring our curriculum, supports, and communities to an online experience, all while continuing to build authentic relationships with DCPS students and families.

### **DCPS ReOpens Strong**

This past summer, we asked families to provide feedback to help inform how DCPS will reopen for the 2020-2021 School Year. We heard a resounding focus on prioritizing safety, maximizing learning – whether in school or at home, and providing equitable access to resources and supports. We committed to delivering on these expectations and are guided by these principles:

- **Maximizing Learning** by providing rigorous and joyful learning experiences every day — in school or at home.
- **Promoting Equity** by ensuring every student has access to the supplies and supports they need for a safe return to learning.
- **Prioritizing Safety** by putting in place robust health and safety protocols for staff and students.

### ***Maximizing Learning***

DCPS has taken critical steps to create a virtual school environment where every student is given the opportunities and supports that they need to thrive while learning from home. We are proud to share that we have seen an attendance rate of 92 percent, thanks to the hard work of our teachers and school-based staff. We recognize that learning at home is only possible in collaboration with our families, teachers, school leaders, and other school-based staff.

Now, more than ever, we know that families are our strongest partners. Our goal remains to ensure that families have the supports needed to navigate virtual learning. Our #ReopenStrong website is updated regularly with information on grading, attendance, and policies for School Year 2020-2021. In August, we relaunched Parent University, a virtual workshop series for families, with a focus on learning at home. To date, there have been over 11,400 views of these trainings.

DCPS also continues to support teachers and other school-based staff through innovative professional development that respond to the needs of the pandemic. We designed this summer's professional development to focus on what we believe will be critical in both virtual and in-person school scenarios. Staff members attended sessions centered around leading successful hybrid learning at home and at school, cultivating wellness, and building relationships, routines, and resilience. As a part of this commitment, DCPS spent the summer working with over 200 teachers to develop an innovative, user-friendly, efficient, and organized approach to virtual learning. In addition to our online curriculum, we introduced a cross-disciplinary Global Cornerstone called Living Through History. Our students in grades Pre-K to 12 will engage in a common experience: documenting and reflecting on their personal



experiences, while creating virtual time capsules in response to the global pandemic and this time of increased awareness of racial injustice.

### ***Promoting Equity***

At the same time, we know that our commitment to equity remains critical against the challenges our community faces. We know positive, loving relationships drive healthy development and learning. Our goal is for all students to be prepared to learn from a supportive teacher through rigorous and joyful learning opportunities and have access to the technology they need to learn in a hybrid or remote setting.

Technology is now a vital component of our new way of learning. DCPS is working to ensure that families have the technology, training, and support needed to navigate and excel in virtual learning. With the support of Mayor Bowser, we were able to grow our inventory to more than 45,000 devices for students in grades PK-12. To date, we have distributed more than 29,000 devices, including over 1,900 iPads for our youngest learners. Many of our devices are LTE-enabled, which ensures that internet access is no longer a barrier for DCPS students. Through Mayor Bowser's leadership, the District of Columbia has also launched a \$3.3 million Internet for All initiative providing monumental investments towards free high-speed internet access for up to 25,000 disconnected low-income students and families.

DCPS understands that this technological investment will not overcome all of the barriers that our families face, but also recognizes it was an important first step. We also know that technical questions or troubleshooting needs will arise when learning at home. Therefore, DCPS and the Office of the Chief Technology Officer (OCTO) have partnered to provide a family-facing technical support center to help with technical issues. We know learning at home looks different for every family and are proud to provide this 24/7 resource.

### ***Prioritizing Safety***

As the pandemic evolves, we are continuing to prepare our buildings for reopening with hybrid learning as soon as it is safe to do so. As Mayor Bowser shared earlier this week, select DCPS schools are opening for Student Support Center and Career and Technical Education programming. DCPS school leaders and partners have designed specialized in-person programming opportunities for small groups of students during Term 1 to supplement the learning at home experience.

With safety and equitable access top of mind, we are actively considering options that would allow for students, especially those furthest from opportunity, to return to schools to receive the high-quality instruction and critical supports that prepare them for lifelong success. We continue to work closely with Mayor Bowser, DC Health, other District agencies, and our union partners, to determine the best way to welcome staff and students back into our facilities.

We heard from our school community about wanting to see how we are meeting our health and safety commitments, first introduced in July. DCPS is actively taking steps to safely return students to buildings, including developing health and safety guidance for staff and students, ensuring learning spaces are set-up to support socially distant activities, and procuring health and safety supplies.

In coordination with DC Health, schools are receiving detailed guidance and intensive technical assistance from central office teams to ensure that every school is prepared to meet their individual school community's needs ahead of a potential reopening for Term 2 in November. We are working to ensure necessary supplies are procured and provided to schools and that staff are trained for potential



operational scenarios. School leadership, operational staff, and relevant central office teams will conduct building walkthroughs, alongside parent and community leaders, to determine schools are ready to reopen.

In preparation for the return of in-person learning, we are in the process of evaluating and updating HVAC systems, starting with our elementary schools. Over the coming weeks, 17 contractors will go to all 80 elementary schools to upgrade filters. The purpose of HVAC enhancements is to ensure that a greater volume of fresh air enters our school buildings and that we have increased filtration. We will continue to update all stakeholders on the progress of these improvements.

Throughout the summer, we purchased items for schools like PPE, hand sanitizer, cleaning supplies, and resources to re-configure school spaces. This includes approximately 2 million face masks, which will be required for all staff and students during in-person learning. We are training staff around new health guidelines, safety procedures, building operations, and ways to support adults and students with trauma. As we look to November and Term 2, we are also maintaining our commitment to keep clear lines of communications to families and staff on all issues. In the coming weeks, families can expect a consistent flow of communications regarding school operations, resources, and reminders about the safety measures being implemented in their school.

### **Conclusion**

We know that the start of School Year 2020-2021 was different than in past school years and look to the coming days when we reopen our buildings and welcome back students and staff in the safest way possible. I appreciate the partnership with the D.C. Council to ensure that our children have safe, rigorous, and joyful learning experiences throughout the virtual, hybrid, and eventual return to in-person learning. DCPS is eager to provide students with equitable access to resources to learn outside of the classroom and plans to transform our operational practices for the health and safety of our entire school community. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions at this time.

