

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



Public Roundtable  
on  
“School Reopening and Academic Recovery: Government Witness Testimony”

Testimony of  
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Chancellor

Before the  
Council of the District of Columbia  
Committee of the Whole  
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairperson

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Live via Zoom Video Conference Broadcast



Good afternoon Chairman Mendelson, members of the Committee of the Whole, 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.

Today's hearing is on an incredibly important topic, and I want to share with you more about our progress this spring, plans for the summer, and what we are building toward next year with the full return of our students.

I want to begin with an appreciation of our students, staff, teachers, school leaders, and families. They have exhibited tremendous resiliency during the COVID-19 public health emergency.

While we have seen success in DCPS virtual learning, we also hear from parents and families that their students are ready for more time in school. We hear from teachers that their students need individualized support that is best provided in-person; and from students excited to return to in-person learning, we hear that they miss their relationships with their teachers and peers.

Our plan to return to full in-person learning this fall is rooted in a clear understanding that COVID-19 has disproportionately affected our students and families of color and our schools in Wards 7 and 8. Black students experienced the most considerable drop in in-seat attendance this year, and academically, the early literacy gap is widening between Black and White students. These inequities informed the decision to fully reopen in the fall and are why we are placing learning recovery at the heart of everything we do. As a result, we are aggressively targeting federal stimulus dollars to fund initiatives that address the academic and social emotional learning impacts of COVID-19.

Since November, when we started our phased approach to reopening school, DCPS has seen an increase in the number of students back in the classroom, jumping from 900 students returning to school in Term 2 to 10,000 students scheduled for Term 3. We now we have more than 14,000 DCPS students scheduled for in-person programming at their school each week in Term 4.

This summer, we will build on this momentum and offer expanded enrichment and summer learning fun for up to 19,000 students.

With that in mind, we are excited to fully open in the fall.

Our city-wide plan is to have in-person learning five days a week for all students in School Year 2021-22. Through collaboration, transparency, and flexibility, we are working to ensure our schools have the resources they need to support the academic and social-emotional well-being of our students. As we look to next year, we are adapting our approach to provide a multi-tiered system of supports for students as they return. We are focused on enhancing the school experience and accelerating student learning by elevating our focus in four key areas: (1) strengthening relationships between students, teachers, and families; (2) providing joyful learning opportunities that accelerate learning; (3) continuing our unwavering focus on health and safety; and (4) addressing inequities. Let me dive into these areas a bit more deeply:

- 1. Build Strong Relationships between Families, Students, and Teachers.**



The foundation of our work is strengthening the relationships with families, students, and teachers. For our families, we are hosting listening sessions this spring to learn more about what they need to feel confident returning to in-person learning this fall. We are creating more family-focused resources, including videos, to help families visualize their child back in the classroom. And we are excited to relaunch our home visit model, with a recommendation that visits happen in the community or outdoors, so families and teachers can build trusting relationships over the summer in alignment with health and safety guidelines.

We know our students thrive when they understand how much we care about them as individuals. Our leaders and teachers believe in a whole-child and trauma-informed approach. As such, we are dedicating classroom time to build relationships through learning opportunities, elevating and encouraging student voices, providing space in our classrooms for students to practice emotional regulation techniques, and setting consistent and positive school-wide behavior expectations.

We also recognize the additional supports that our teachers and school staff will need. That is why, for example, we are investing \$5 million to provide specialized, comprehensive training to help our teachers be experts in building student resiliency.

## **2. Design Joyful Learning Opportunities that Accelerate Learning.**

Building on Term 4, we are excited to offer engaging and joyful in-person and virtual opportunities this summer that will prioritize students who have a demonstrated need for additional supports. New this year are our school-led Summer Acceleration Academies which were designed in partnership with Recovery Community Corps members. Parents can register for summer learning opportunities now at [www.dcpsreopnstrong.com](http://www.dcpsreopnstrong.com).

DCPS has created a comprehensive plan to accelerate learning this fall. We want parents and community members to be able to sense this student-centered, joyful learning. Our approach is guided by best practices and emphasizes the whole child, with meaningful learning opportunities and investments in student wellness. Students will be immersed in their grade level curriculum, with a rich set of tools and resources for educators to make targeted interventions where there are learning gaps. We will prioritize research-based foundational literacy instruction, opportunities to build literacy skills and vocabulary across content areas, and small group instruction within classes.

## **3. Demonstrate Our Unwavering Commitment to Student, Staff and Family Health and Safety.**

The health and safety of students and staff remains a priority in all of our planning. We have proven that we can operate our schools safely during this pandemic and have been recognized as national leaders with our health and safety planning.

As we look ahead to School Year 2021-22, we will continue to lean on the expertise of the CDC and the DC Department of Health for guidance on COVID-19. We will deploy our layered mitigation strategy, including continuing to enforce health screenings, investing in HVAC and



facility upgrades, and engaging in more frequent deep cleaning practices. Additionally, we will continue to train staff on health, safety, and operational policies to ensure fidelity in practice.

Lastly, as we prepare for a full return to in-person learning in the fall, we know the importance of our families receiving the vaccine to ensure an effective, multi-layered protection strategy. We are pleased to partner with Mayor Bowser to support the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine for our staff and we are collaborating with local health officials to host vaccination clinics at our schools.

#### 4. And Finally, Address and Dismantle Persistent Inequities.

We know that COVID-19 has had an unequal impact on our families across our city, and we are centering our recovery plan around addressing this inequity. DCPS is committed to taking conscious and deliberate action to combat institutional racial inequity. Our work is focused on eliminating opportunity gaps, interrupting institutional bias, and removing barriers to academic and social success, particularly for students of color. This school year, our teachers and school leaders led the way in this work with our pioneering Anti-Racist Educator University, a strategic lever for equity that provides DCPS staff with shared learning rooted in anti-racism. We are dedicated to addressing disparate outcomes from every angle.

Our commitment of equity shows in many areas of our work. In a recent round of listening sessions, we prioritized hearing from our most impacted families in Wards 4, 5, 7, and 8—ensuring that we are lifting up the concerns of those who may not typically have their voices elevated. Linguistic and culturally responsive family engagement has also been a key tenant of our recovery work as we prioritize townhalls and meetings in Spanish with key city and nonprofit partners. We are also prioritizing equity by ensuring acceleration funds are used to address students’ most urgent needs and, as such, we view our technology investments through an equity lens. For example, we are committed to ensuring every student in grades 3-12 has a dedicated device because technology can make content accessible to students who might not otherwise have it.

In the coming months, our priority is to ensure that all DCPS students have a healthy and safe return to in-person learning, while working diligently to accelerate student progress. We appreciate the support of Mayor Bowser and the DC Council’s partnership in these critical endeavors. In a year like no other, we have consistently seen the value of our community and the resilience of our youth.

Thank you, and I’m happy to answer any questions you have at this time.

