

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



Public Roundtable

on

“Re-Opening District of Columbia Public Schools and District of Columbia Public Charter  
Schools for School Year 2021-22”

Testimony of

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Chancellor

&

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DC Public School Principals

Before the

Council of the District of Columbia

Committee of the Whole

The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairperson

July 22, 2021

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. I appreciate the collaboration and commitment of the Council as we prepare to fully re-open on August 30 with in-person learning for every student.

At DCPS, we know what it takes to build great schools. We have seen firsthand the progress that comes when we invest in our students and support our educators. The pandemic disrupted our way of life, our classrooms, and our ability to nurture our students with in-person learning and care. But it will not disrupt our positive trajectory as a school district.

As the fastest improving urban school district in the nation, what we are doing is working. But we know we have more to do to make sure every student benefits from the transformative power of public education. Our challenge now is to rebuild even stronger than before. Today, I want to provide an update on our plans to operate a safe, joyful, and rigorous learning environment, where families can feel confident in the academic, social, and emotional development of their students.

DCPS' plans for the fall reopening are based on the tremendous work and experience our staff has done to date welcoming students back to school last school year and this summer. With resources and guidance, we have what we need to fully reopen safely.

First, let me begin by providing an update on our health and safety planning. To date, we have completed over \$5 million dollars in air quality improvements in all of our schools. This preparation included installing high-grade, HVAC filters that remove bacteria and virus carriers, adding portable filters that complete air changes every 15 minutes, and installing indoor air quality sensors. Schools will also receive daily, enhanced deep cleaning per DC Health protocols. At this time, we are planning to require masks for all students, staff, and visitors.

Second, I'd like to address our plans for how we are preparing for in-person learning. DCPS hopes and expects the vast majority of our students will attend in-person this fall. For the small number of students with medical needs, we will offer a rich virtual learning environment and have set-up a process to families register, in alignment with OSSE guidelines. We want our students to feel the joy of being back in the classroom and the excitement of a challenging and comprehensive academic curriculum. We will prepare our students for what is next, whether that is the next grade, higher education, or career. This approach is woven throughout our work, from how we plan to start the very first days and weeks of school, how we are preparing our curriculum, and how we will measure the progress of our students. We are focused on supporting the whole child, meaning we will look at our students' academic achievement alongside their social and emotional well-being. The science is clear—you cannot learn if you feel unsafe, scared, hungry, or stressed. This year, we are investing more funds in mental health supports, small group instruction and tutoring, and creating a new district-wide system to measure and support the well-being and academic progress of our students.

As we prepare our buildings and classrooms, we are also in the midst of continuing trust building with our families and staff. We know there is a disparity in how our communities of color feel about returning to in-person learning compared to our white communities. To that end, we are intentionally leveraging school-level engagement where confidence is built through listening and honest dialogue. For example, LaSalle-Backus hosted staff listening sessions and an "Our Doors are Open" parent and caregiver event. Phelps held a listening session to address questions from families and hear their concerns about returning

to in-person learning. Nalle had a “Summer Slam” field day for students to get reacquainted with school. Throughout the summer, schools are hosting events and building tours for families to enroll, get vaccinated, and ask questions of staff.

As I close, I’d like to briefly update Council on the success of our summer programming. In addition to our traditional summer offerings, every DCPS school is currently hosting fun and enriching Summer Acceleration Academies focused on both social emotional development and learning supports for students. In sum, we have over 14,000 students enrolled in summer learning designed to meet students where they are and help them feel a strong sense of belonging with one-on-one and small group instruction.

To share more about what our students and families will experience this fall, I am joined by two principals who will share what our vision looks like in their school community.

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Hello, my name is **Principal Charlette Strickland**, and I am the proud principal of Hart Middle School in Ward 8. We are so excited to welcome our families back to school this summer and next school year. To ensure everyone feels safe and confident, we are hosting Summer Parent Cafe events in our community where caregivers will have the opportunity to enroll, meet their teachers, and ask questions about next school year.

Our health and safety procedures include continuous health screenings and cleaning enhancements which have proven successful this summer. We are also offering building tours to ensure our families can see our plan in action and see that we are ready to open safely. We will also continue to share resources on vaccinations as part of our community engagement work.

This summer, we are also meeting with families in-person to develop individual student academic acceleration plans. Our goal is to reopen stronger than before by bringing the tools and lessons from last year to re-imagine how Hart can meet the needs of our students and families.

Our theme for the year is “Grace, Gratitude, Grit...Buckle Up, Let’s SOAR!” During our first week, we will have a school-wide interdisciplinary unit that will focus on building student efficacy and addressing social-emotional needs. We have developed an academic team building activity through a partnership with Terrapin Adventures that will allow our students to build camaraderie and problem solve in support of relationship building. The “joy factor” has always been one of our core values – joy is student led and staff actualized. Celebration happens every day at Hart, and this year we are excited to celebrate BIG to show our students how happy we are to see them in person. Thank you.

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Good morning, my name is **Principal Megan Vroman** and I serve as the Principal of Ida B. Wells Middle School in Ward 4. At Wells, we are meticulously planning to meet the ever-changing social, emotional, and academic needs of our scholars.

Despite the many obstacles our students have faced in the last year, we are steadfast in ensuring our school environment remains filled with high expectations, and that each scholar is equipped with the tools necessary to uphold our core values of “Love, Serve, and Grow.” We want each of our scholars to develop the self-efficacy to be successful in their high school academic careers (and beyond) and we remain committed to nurturing the whole child. As a result, with the assistance of our Local School

Advisory Team, we decided to invest some of our ESSER funds in the expansion of our Wellness Team, which included adding School Counselors and Social Emotional Learning Coaches to our team for the upcoming school year. We are excited to continue our commitment to our School Enrichment Model clusters, which allow scholars to engage in self-selected, interest-based groups which juxtapose the importance of social-activism with everyday interests.

This past school year we partnered with City Bridge to create a high-intensity tutoring plan, as members of their Inaugural Design Sprint. As a result of this work, we will be partnering with Higher Achievement to create small group and one-on-one instructional opportunities for our scholars with the greatest needs, both during and after school. This past year, led by our school psychologist, we constructed a guide for our teachers to support our new system of holistic and timely assessments of the academic, social, and emotional progress of our students through our Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). We will measure our progress using the MTSS dashboard, a real-time indicator for our staff of each student's academic and social-emotional competencies.

We recognize what a pivotal time middle school is for each of our scholars developmentally and are excited to welcome our scholars back into the building. We remain committed to the wellness of our scholars while ambitiously finding joyful, innovative ways to remediate and accelerate the growth of our incredible scholars. Thank you.