

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



Public Hearing

on

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

Testimony of

Dr. Lewis D. Ferebee

Chancellor of DC Public Schools

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. We appreciate the Council's continued collaboration to support our students and return to school even stronger than before.

As educators, our greatest joy comes from seeing students learning enthusiastically. We've seen the excitement from our students as they return to the classroom and reconnect with classmates, mentors, coaches, and friends.

Since the start of the school year, I have visited schools across all eight wards in the District. I've seen our excellent educators and school leaders in action. The joy from our students is unmistakable. In speaking with students and parents across the city, we hear how much the return to in-person was needed for the well-being of our students.

Our students are benefitting from friendships, hands on academic experiences, and access to our outstanding teachers, counselors, and support teams. I'm excited to see our students building relationships that will help inspire a love of learning and the unique classroom experiences happening across the city.

For example, at Stevens Early Learning Center, students are learning about "Music Around The World," including Go-Go percussion techniques. At Hendley Elementary School, first graders built number bonds and praised each other's thinking. At Dunbar High School, biology teachers are holding outdoor science labs. And at Lafayette, all 900 students created artwork that will be exhibited on the National Mall.

As the school year continues, our focus will be making sure our students feel safe, loved, challenged, and prepared.

### **Health & Safety**

I want to acknowledge that this school year still feels very different for our families. Every aspect of school has been re-thought with health and safety procedures in mind. Our students and staff are working hard to learn new routines and protocols. The health, safety, and well-being of our students and staff are always our top priority. Therefore, we regularly review, assess, and strengthen our approach based on the guidance of health officials and safety experts. DCPS has employed a robust, layered mitigation strategy to reduce the spread of COVID-19 based on three key pillars: *prevent, screen, and inform*.

I recognize that there are families within our community who continue to have concerns and anxiety about the return to in-person learning, particularly in light of the Delta variant. We know that when families enroll their students in DC Public Schools, they trust us with the safety, education, and enrichment of their children. We take this responsibility seriously.

I want to provide additional information on a few of our measures. I recognize that our families want to understand what happens when there is a reported case of COVID-19 within their schools. When DCPS is notified of a positive case, DCPS will begin a contact tracing investigation. We will provide self-quarantine instructions to close contacts, notify the school community about the reported positive case if the person was in the building during their infectious period, and follow steps outlined by DC Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for cleaning, disinfecting, and sanitizing of school space. To minimize

disruption, DCPS teachers post course assignments and learning resources on Canvas so students can access learning materials in quarantine.

As part of our prevention work, DCPS is committed to ensuring the air quality in our schools by retaining MERV-13 HVAC filters, portable HEPA filters in classrooms that complete air changes every 15 minutes, and indoor air quality sensors.

We are constantly monitoring the effectiveness of our protocols at the systems-level and have shown that we can be responsive and quickly pivot when needed. For example, when supply chain shortages delayed the delivery of outdoor learning equipment, we mobilized for the immediate shipment of temporary folding chairs and tables. Our operations team ensured all schools received water bottle filling stations and hand sanitizing stations. We have also begun bi-weekly walkthroughs to monitor the supply of personal protective equipment at each school and compliance with our health and safety protocols.

There are also countless examples of our school teams making adjustments to daily operations to strengthen our protocols. For example, Wilson High School added a second lunch period to increase their capacity for social distancing. Early childhood educators developed age-appropriate explanations and routines to increase student comfort and familiarity with mask wearing.

Communicating frequently and through multiple channels and languages continues to be a priority. We recognize that our families have concerns and want to hear more from us. As we have throughout the pandemic, we will continue to contact our families directly via email, robocalls, texts, town halls and by posting information on [www.dcpsreopenstrong.com](http://www.dcpsreopenstrong.com). This site includes case notifications, our health and safety response protocols, vaccination registration, and other resources for families including community town halls and Parent University workshops.

We know that the most effective way to prevent the spread of COVID-19 is for every eligible person to get vaccinated. By November 1, 2021, all adults who are regularly in schools and student-athletes who are 12 and older must be vaccinated against COVID-19.

To help families meet the requirements of their childhood vaccines and encourage students ages 12 or older to be vaccinated against COVID-19, DCPS collaborated with DC Health to hold immunization pop-up clinics at 16 schools throughout all eight wards. These clinics will run through September 30. We continue to highly encourage families to visit one of our incentive sites, where students who receive their first shot can receive a \$51 gift card or Apple AirPods. In addition, all students in DC who receive the COVID-19 vaccine will also be eligible to win an iPad or a \$25,000 college scholarship.

In addition to our COVID-19 protocols, we continue to make supporting the mental health of our students a priority. This year, recovery efforts are targeted toward the expressed needs of students during the pandemic. School-based mental health professionals are trained and ready to provide supportive and therapeutic services to students and families at *every* school who need assistance for *any* reason. Our goal is to ensure that students are physically and psychologically safe and can fully participate in academic learning. New this year, we are also amplifying youth voices in all DCPS high schools through the Youth Mental Health Ambassador program, a peer-to-peer mental health opportunity.

## **Learning Acceleration**

Finally, I'd like to close by emphasizing our academic approach. DCPS is working as a community to create joyful and rigorous learning opportunities. Each school developed a "First Three Weeks" plan to help students re-adjust to the school environment. While we work to support the success of our students in math, English Language Arts, science, and social studies, we are also prioritizing time in PE, art, and music because we know these areas contribute to student wellness, deep engagement, and positive school experiences.

School teams are also gathering data to better understand the needs of the whole child – academically, socially, and emotionally with the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) data tracking system. This allows schools to provide each student with the targeted supports they need. We are committed to extending learning time, and each school is actively providing tutoring for a subset of their students on critical skills.

I want to close by recognizing the contribution of every staff member who has been working around the clock to ensure our students return to safe and joyful learning experiences. This would not have been possible without them, and I am proud to lead a school district with such a dedicated team.

I'm happy to take any questions you have at this time.