



**Testimony to the House Education Committee
Public Hearing on the Impact of COVID-19 on Our School Institutions and Students.
February 23, 2021**

Good Afternoon, Chairman Sonney, Chairman Longietti, and distinguished members of the House Education Committee. We are William Hite, Superintendent of the School District of Philadelphia, and Joyce Wilkerson, President of the Board of Education of the School District of Philadelphia (the District). We appreciate the opportunity to provide you with information on how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted our schools and students.

About the District

First, we would like to provide you with information on the District. We are the eighth largest school district in the nation and serve almost eight times as many students as Pittsburgh Public Schools, the second largest district in Pennsylvania. We are a community of 19,000 caring employees working together with parents, families, volunteers and community members to support the limitless potential of 203,000 young scholars. We are committed to educating and graduating generations of thought leaders, entrepreneurs, artists, government officials and change makers.

We are proud of the progress we have made. In just the last four years, more than half of our schools have improved on one or more metrics in the District's School Progress Report. We have doubled the number of high performing schools and cut in half the number of low performing schools. Our four year graduation rate is increasing and we have more students earning industry credentials and enrolling in Advance Placement and dual enrollment classes.

We have also stabilized our finances and made targeted investments. Since 2017, we have regained local control of the District and our bond rating has been upgraded to investment grade for the first time since 1977. With new funding from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the City of Philadelphia, we invested in our students and schools by refilling over 2,500 teaching and support staff positions, adding academic programs, strengthening behavioral supports for our most at-risk students and reestablishing extracurricular activities. We also invested in our buildings by modernizing classrooms, upgrading technology for students and staff, making much-needed repairs and remediating environmental hazards.

COVID-19 Impact

A year ago, we were in the midst of planning for a 2020-2021 school year that continued to build on this progress. Unfortunately, in mid-March of last year those plans began to change. On March 13, 2020, the District announced that schools would close for a two week period in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost one year later and our schools are still closed for in-person instruction.

Just like districts across the commonwealth, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on our students, families, teachers, staff, and schools. Shifting 120,000 students to a remote learning program was a herculean effort and we are grateful for the work our teachers and school-based staff have done to adapt to a new learning environment while working to support the educational needs of our students and their families. But we know that students learn best in classrooms.

Since closing last March, our top priority has been -- and continues to be -- to return students to school buildings. To accomplish this goal, we have:

- Invested \$65 million in personal protective equipment for students and staff, touchless hand sanitizer stations, plexiglass partitions, ventilation repairs and enhancements for fresh air flow, social distancing signage, and other layers of safety that are proven to keep the level of virus transmission in schools low;
- Spent \$250 million in our buildings to address lead and asbestos, and make other improvements;
- Completed Comprehensive Ventilation Assessments of every occupied space in schools and provided certified assessment reports of outside air flow to school staff;
- Deep cleaned and disinfected every school using expanded cleaning protocols and added, hired and trained new custodians; and
- Installed IT/CCTV, removed stairwells and hallways, and completed ventilation projects at 117 facilities.

Two weeks ago, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released guidelines for safely reopening schools and we can confidently say that the School District of Philadelphia is in full compliance.

We have done all of this work because we know our students -- especially our youngest learners and those with complex needs -- learn best in a classroom with a great teacher and other caring staff to nurture and support them. In school buildings, children learn the social, emotional and behavioral skills that are vital to their healthy development and well-being.

Unfortunately, we are already seeing the impact of remote learning on academic achievement. In a District administered reading assessment, we found that students currently in grades first through fifth declined an average of 6 percentiles from 2019-20 Winter assessment to 2020-21 Fall assessment. Some of this decline is not unexpected. Previous research has identified “summer learning loss” as a problem nationwide, and in Philadelphia, a comparable group of students showed a 2-percentile decline in the same reading tests in the prior year.

What is striking about the decline is how large it is for students who were 2019-20 kindergarteners and 2020-21 first-grade students. While comparable kindergarten to first-grade students showed a decline of 7 percentiles from Winter to next-Fall in the school-year before COVID-19 school closures, during remote learning, the decline from 2019-20 Winter to 2020-21 Fall was 15 percentiles for the 2020-21 first-graders. This is the largest decline among all the student cohorts who took the reading assessment.

In addition to academic challenges, we know our students are experiencing trauma. Schools provide more than just academics to children. In schools, students learn social and emotional skills and have access to mental health and other support services. For many of our students, schools are safe and stimulating places to be while parents or guardians are working. Throughout the pandemic, our students and staff have experienced isolation; separation from friends, teachers, and colleagues; illness or loss of loved ones; and disruption of the familiar routines that made them feel cared for and safe. They have also experienced the pain and division caused by racial injustice.

To support our community, the District launched Healing Together in August, 2020. Healing Together was designed to address the needs of our students, staff, and families in the wake of this sustained trauma. Healing Together encompasses an intensive focus in four areas: 1) mental health and trauma; 2) social-emotional learning; 3) relationships and community; and 4) adult wellness. Other vital supports include the Philly Hopeline, a partnership with Uplift Center for Grieving Children -- the first sizeable partnership of its kind in the country -- to offer expert counseling services and supports for students, parents and families who may be struggling with grief and loss. We understand that these supports, while vital, do not take the place of traditional classroom instruction. And we know the way to best address this trauma is through in-person interactions with teachers and support staff.

But it's not just us who want students back in classrooms. It's also our families. There are families across all grade levels who want their children to resume in-person learning, including the parents of 9,000 pre-k through second grade students who have signed their children up for our hybrid program.

Returning to In-Person Learning

The District's plan to return to in-person instruction has faced some challenges. But we know if 58 of 62 southeastern Pennsylvania school districts can open safely for in-person instruction, we can too. We know if urban school districts across the country -- including those in Boston, Chicago, DC, and New York City -- can open safely for in-person instruction, we can too. And we know if more than 200 parochial and private schools within the city can open safely for in-person instruction, we can too.

We know we all agree – families, teachers, the District, and our elected officials – on the importance of re-opening public schools for in-person learning. Our disagreement has focused on how to do so safely. These are legitimate concerns, and we need to address them -- with our parents and students, and with our teachers and staff.

We want to make clear that we at the District are committed to continuing our work with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers and the Philadelphia Department of Public Health (PDPH) to facilitate the safe return of teachers and students through the following measures:

1. In partnership with the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), we have secured ample supplies of rapid testing kits, and we will make rapid testing available to all teachers and staff working in our schools, to help detect positive COVID-19 cases and prevent the spread of the virus;
2. Also in partnership with CHOP and the PDPH, we have begun rolling out COVID-19 vaccine appointments, starting first with staff who have already been working in our school buildings and those who are set to return to support our PreK-2 students. Invitations for appointments started going out to some of those staff members in that category last week;
3. The District has developed a process to actively support PDPH's contact tracing efforts which will help mitigate the spread of the virus in school communities;
4. We are committed to following the guidance of health experts to keep our students and staff safe. We appreciate legitimate concerns about building safety, and we agree that no one should be asked to return to a school unless it is safe to do so; and
5. We know that the best way to enhance the health and safety of all is to have multiple layers of safety. We have put in place extensive health and safety protocols for students and adults; we have extensive inventories of PPE for staff and students to support mandatory mask wearing and facial covering in schools, as well as new classroom and

bathroom setups to ensure social distancing; touchless hand sanitizer stations in all hallways; cleaning supply stations in classrooms; maximum occupancy signs outside each room; safety signage throughout schools; and enhanced cleaning protocols using EPA-approved cleaning products.

We are scheduled to have 9,000 Pre-K through second grade students return for two days a week at approximately 150 school buildings starting on March 1, 2021. While the conditions of these buildings vary, often depending on their age, and the District believes that all are safe for re-opening.

For our returning families, we want them to come to school and see for themselves the work that has been done to ensure the safety of your children. We are hosting open houses that comply with our health and safety protocols at each and every school we seek to re-open, where we will detail the steps we have taken and address questions and concerns.

We know that all of us recognize the importance of re-opening schools for in-person learning and we believe all sides have the best interests of our children at heart. We want to work together to resolve our differences and make it happen.

Thank you again for your time and the opportunity to testify before you today. On behalf of the School District of Philadelphia, we are pleased to provide you with any additional information you need and answer any questions you might have.