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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee of the Whole

Public Roundtable:
Re-Opening District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS)
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Introduction

Thank you Chairperson Mendelson and members of the Committee for the opportunity to submit written testimony concerning the return to in-person instruction in DC Public Schools (DCPS). My name is Sharra E. Greer, and I am the Policy Director at Children's Law Center, a resident of the District, and a parent of two students who attend DCPS. I am testifying on behalf of the Children's Law Center which fights so every DC child can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education.¹ With almost 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, Children's Law Center reaches 1 out of every 9 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year.

In previous reopening roundtables, we have testified about the importance of a safe return to in-person learning focused on the students who have struggled the most with virtual learning.² All students are suffering learning loss, but the impact falls disproportionately on children with disabilities, Black and brown children, and English language learners.³ We know in-person instruction is more effective and could help close the learning gap. However, as the reopening has unfolded it has become clear that many DC families are uncomfortable returning their children to classrooms. Reasonable fears about the continued spread of the COVID-19 virus and further disruptions to their child's education persist across the District but are most prevalent in low-income neighborhoods. In addition, at this time it is possible to only bring back a small

percentage of students. As a result, many of the students who are suffering the greatest learning loss remain in a virtual learning environment. We urge DCPS to confront this reality head-on and redouble efforts to maintain and improve the quality of virtual learning. In addition, across the District for all students in all schools, traditional and charter, the reality of learning loss must be acknowledged, and a plan prepared to address it.

Many of the Students Most at Risk are Not Returning to In-Person Learning

The current capacity of DCPS's reopening plan accommodates less than 30% of their total student population. When one takes into account the underutilization of the current available seats,⁴ less than 18% of DCPS's student population returned to in-person instruction. A family's decision whether or not to return to in-person classes at this time is complicated and deeply personal. However, upon analyzing the data of who chose to return, there are serious issues of racial and socioeconomic equity. The families in our poorest Wards rejected spots in elementary schools at twice the rate of our wealthy Wards.⁵ There are a variety of reasons for this, but many families are understandably afraid. Black residents make up 45% of the DC population,⁶ but 74% of DC's COVID deaths.⁷

In addition, there are issues of trust. DCPS has repeatedly faced criticism that they are not providing meaningful opportunities for families to engage in the planning process for re-opening schools. Over the course of the pandemic, DCPS has issued surveys that

suffered from accessibility concerns, has held town halls that do not provide meaningful opportunities for questions, and have issued plans that do not reflect the expressed interests of students and their families.⁸ Further, schools have struggled to keep basic supplies like soap available pre-pandemic leading to skepticism that promised supplies will be available.

These issues of safety and trust will have to be addressed if we are going to successful transition back to in-person learning. Hopefully, with vaccines becoming more available and safe experiences with in-person learning families will become more comfortable sending their children back. Until then, DCPS must continue to ensure that all children are learning and learning loss is minimized.

Maintaining and Improving the Quality of Virtual Learning Must be a Priority

With so many of the students who have been identified as having the most significant learning loss staying home there must be a focus on maintaining and improving virtual learning. As we have previously testified, many students were not able to successfully engage in virtual learning prior to some students returning in-person. For many of our client's distance learning has made specialized instruction in the general education classroom nearly non-existent. Some student's disabilities make it difficult to utilize and engage with the online platform. Steps need to be taken to address these and the many other challenges students face with virtual instruction.

The shifts and changes to instruction with some students returning raise concerns that virtual learning will suffer. Because the in-person learning model is slightly different at each school, it is difficult to estimate the exact impact on distance learning. However, we have already heard concerns that, in some schools, students have lost their teacher to in-person instruction and been folded into new virtual classrooms. Not only does this disrupt their already fragmented education but poses capacity problems for those virtual classrooms that are required to take in many new students. Virtual instruction has been difficult in a normal-sized online class, it is more difficult when the class is larger and less cohesive. Such massive online classes will be difficult to manage and limit a teacher's ability to provide meaningful instruction and supports to students.

Some schools are trying simulcast instruction which allows classes to stay together and keeps the class size the same but has other challenges and requires technology. Schools trying to implement hybrid models must be given the proper supports. Schools were promised that they would be provided with the technology and support that they need to conduct hybrid models of instruction. However, there are myriad claims from teachers across the District that they don't have what they need and are having to crowdsource the funds needed to purchase document cameras and other technology needed to simulcast instruction to both in-person and virtual students. One need only spend a few minutes on the website Donors Choose, a crowdfunding website designed

specifically for educators, to see that teachers do not feel that they have what they need to adequately teach students.

The staffing has significantly shifted to serve in-person learning, 45% of the teacher workforce has been brought back to serve 18% of the students.⁹ Without significant supports and changes to virtual instruction the virtual instruction experience will get worse. Rather than in-person learning helping, a negative impact on virtual learning means that the children most at-risk and most behind will suffer even more.

Looking Forward

As the District plans for the months and year to come, we urge the Council and DCPS to focus on recovery of the significant learning loss that has occurred during this public health crisis. We hope that the Council and DCPS consider a number of other interventions including, but not limited to:

- Expansions to programming and eligibility for Extended School Year (ESY);
- Significant investments in tutoring and credit recovery programming;
- Compensatory education options for students who did not receive the full specialized instruction and/or related services required by their individualized education plans (IEPs); and,
- Planning and programming for students who did not receive timely special education evaluations during the pandemic.
- Additional staff to provide interventions and supports

Conclusion

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony to the Council. Children's Law Center is committed to working with the Council, DCPS and other stakeholders as DCPS

moves forward with its school reopening plans and expanding supports for students learning from home.

¹ Judges, pediatricians, and families turn to Children’s Law Center to be the voice for children who are abused or neglected, who aren’t learning in school, or who have health problems that can’t be solved by medicine alone. With almost 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, we reach one out of every nine children in DC’s poorest neighborhoods--more than 5,000 children and families each year. We multiply this impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit all children. *See* <https://www.childrenslawcenter.org/>.

² *See* Sharra E. Greer, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, “Return to In-Person Instruction in DC Public Schools (November 5, 2020), *available at* <https://www.childrenslawcenter.org/sites/default/files/attachments/testimonies/Children%27s%20Law%20Center%20Written%20Testimony%20School%20Reopening.pdf>; *see also* Sharra Greer, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, “Return to In-Person Instruction in DC Public Schools (December 2, 2020), *available at* <https://www.childrenslawcenter.org/sites/default/files/attachments/testimonies/Children%27s%20Law%20Center%20Testimony%20School%20Reopening.pdf>

³ *See* COVID 19’s Impact on DC Student Achievement *available at* <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f9857f027d55d2170cd92ac/t/5fdb6d5dc70d2641e55ff244/1608215913800/COVID-19%27s+Impact+on+DC+Student+Achievement+-+EmpowerK12+Initial+Findings+Dec+2020.pdf>. Note: There is evidence that some students with disabilities are not being adversely impact in their reading growth but this varies greatly and depends on the disability.

⁴ *See* Perry Stein, “The racial disparities over who is returning to D.C. classrooms puts equity spotlight on reopening plans,” WASH. POST (Jan 30, 2021), *available at* https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/washington-schools-reopening/2021/01/30/db479122-6009-11eb-9061-07abcc1f9229_story.html noting that only 9200 seats have been accepted.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *See*

<https://www.dchealthmatters.org/?module=demographicdata&controller=index&action=index&id=130951§ionId=>

⁷ <https://coronavirus.dc.gov/data>

⁸ *See*

<https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiYmNiNmE5ZGYtM2RmNC00OGI2LWI2Y2MtMjFhNjE4MwYw%20MTQ3IiwidCI6ImI4NmUwZjQwLTFiNDQtNDk5MC1iOTA2LTQwYjFhMWNIMTEtYSIsImMiOiF9&pag%20eName=ReportSection40187428ace993906a02%20>

⁹ *See* Perry Stein, “The racial disparities over who is returning to D.C. classrooms puts equity spotlight on reopening plans,” WASH. POST (Jan 30, 2021), *available at* https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/washington-schools-reopening/2021/01/30/db479122-6009-11eb-9061-07abcc1f9229_story.html