



August 25, 2021

The Honorable Muriel Bowser
Mayor
1350 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

Dear Mayor Bowser:

We want to acknowledge the hard work that you and your team have done in planning for a successful 2021--2022 school year. Challenging in normal times, this year's back-to-school efforts are complicated to a nearly impossible degree by the continuing COVID-19 pandemic. The stress and strain on District students, families, and educators have been immense. We provide recommendations below based on input we have received from them¹. We believe the implementation of these recommendations will greatly decrease the level of community stress and mitigate infection rates within our schools.

Through our engagement efforts and public meetings throughout the summer, the State Board has heard from many residents who are concerned about the safety of their students returning to school. We agree with you that in-person learning should be a priority for all schools in the District. However, we are concerned that many families remain fearful of sending students back in the middle of a surge in infections. Therefore, **we encourage you to allow all Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to add a hybrid or fully virtual option for all families who request it and make additional efforts to ensure school communities understand transition plans if a school closure is warranted.**

We are confident that many families will elect to send their students in-person five days a week, but, for those that believe a different option is best for them, we believe it is important to provide options until the pandemic is over, or at least until infection rates have substantially decreased. To facilitate this decision-making process, **we recommend adjusting attendance policies to provide additional flexibility for excused absences.** It may also be helpful to explore adjustments to the 15-day waiting period for homeschooling so that students can shift more easily.

Current requirements for medical waivers for in-person learning are extremely limited. We have heard that some households' members who are immuno-compromised, vaccine ineligible or otherwise medically fragile have not applied for a waiver. Considering the ease at which COVID-19 spreads, **we urge you to consider expanding the definition of health need exemption to in-person learning to include household member health concerns.**

¹ Our August 18th public meeting was devoted to hearing from the public. We are encouraged by the passion and thoughtful suggestions made during that meeting. Our staff has summarized the testimony and suggestions in a memorandum that we are attaching to this letter for your further consideration.



We are concerned with the potential impact on families if the regular process of attendance referrals to the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) is maintained during the pandemic. It is our understanding that COVID-19 related absences are counted towards the total for referrals to CFSA. **We urge you to direct the State Superintendent of Education to issue an emergency rulemaking to suspend referrals for COVID-19 related absences.**

The plan to test ten percent (10%) of unvaccinated students and staff each week is a good start to ensuring safety in our schools. However, based on information from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the DC Department of Health (DOH) that vaccinated individuals may also be carriers for new variants of the COVID-19 virus, **we advise extending the testing to all students and staff.** We believe this action will not only provide better information for contact tracing and prevention, but also help increase community confidence in the safety of schools. Further, the forms required for testing should allow for digital signatures and should be made readily available at back-to-school events so that it is easier for families to submit the forms efficiently and more equitably.

We are grateful that you have issued an order requiring all District government employees, contractors, and interns to be vaccinated. The State Board will be proposing a policy with a similar requirement for our representatives, employees, fellows, and contractors at our September 15, 2021, Public Meeting. **We would be supportive of a requirement for students sixteen years or older to be vaccinated for COVID-19 in line with CDC recommendations and Food and Drug Administration approval.**

We believe that you should also consider issuing a new public health emergency to ensure that LEAs do not have to pay out of pocket for the COVID-19 testing. To ensure the testing plan, and the isolation of students or staff during a school day, we are concerned with reports that school nurses (under contract through DOH) are not permitted to be the leads on COVID-19 related health issues during the school day. We would appreciate you clarifying the responsibility of school nurses in these situations.

The recent tragic loss of a District student has reminded us all that the technical return to a building is only a small part of the larger considerations around the start of this school year. Schools should be intensively focused on re-socialization, counseling, and understanding what interactions or conflicts between individual students may have been brewing over the last eighteen months. **We urge you to devote emergency funding and services dedicated to mental health for all District students and teachers.** We are hopeful that LEAs would also consider ways to build capacity within school communities for intensive social emotional and mental health supports by reducing student-adult ratios and increasing the number of appropriate support staff.

Finally, we appreciate the Administration’s expansion of funding for outdoor opportunities for students. Being outdoors greatly mitigates the spread of the virus, which is especially important during times when students cannot wear masks, such as during lunch. As students return to in-person learning this school year, the State Board commits to using its engagement platforms to ensure that all school leaders understand what may be possible for outdoor opportunities for lunch and learning. We will also ask that you direct the Office of the Deputy Mayor of Education to





ensure that schools have the resources they need to fully utilize funding and materials available to them to create and maintain such opportunities.

Thank you for reviewing these recommendations. As always, the State Board stands ready to partner with your Administration to serve our students equitably and fully.

The DC State Board of Education

Zachary Parker, President and Ward 5 Representative

Emily Gasoi, Vice President and Ward 1 Representative

Jacque Patterson, At-Large Representative

Allister Chang, Ward 2 Representative

Ruth Wattenberg, Ward 3 Representative

Frazier O’Leary, Ward 4 Representative

Jessica Sutter, Ward 6 Representative

Eboni-Rose Thompson, Ward 7 Representative

Carlene Reid, Ward 8 Representative

Alex O’Sullivan, Student Representative

Juliana Lopez, Student Representative

Ean Bowie, Student Representative

Skye-Ali Johnson, Student Representative

