



D.C. STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION TESTIMONY

**PRESIDENT & WARD 6 REPRESENTATIVE DR. JESSICA SUTTER and
STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE LIV BIRNSTAD**

“No Shots, No School” for School Year 2022–2023

JUNE 29, 2022

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Council of the District of the District of Columbia, and staff, thank you for allowing the D.C. State Board of Education to testify today on *No Shots, No School!*, which is aimed at ensuring that all students attending D.C. public, charter, private, and parochial schools have their required immunizations before the start of the 2022–23 school year. My name is Dr. Jessica Sutter and I have the honor to serve as the Ward 6 Representative and President of the D.C. State Board of Education (State Board). While all youth vaccination efforts are important, today, the State Board’s testimony will focus on youth vaccination efforts related to mitigating the spread of COVID.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the State Board has worked to fully understand how changes in school guidance on COVID have affected families across the District. At the State Board’s January 19 Public Meeting, residents like Becky Ballard testified, *“It’s time we prioritize the social emotional needs of young children and parents...above restrictions around a disease that we are able to manage through vaccination. Our focus should be on vaccinating all students and teachers and doing everything we can to keep classrooms open for all students, especially our youngest learners who have the fewest coping skills to manage quarantines.”*

At the end of January 2021, the State Board [surveyed 1,060 public school teachers](#) representing every D.C. Public School (DCPS) and the majority of public charter schools. This survey served to measure a specific moment in time when District teachers were beginning to return to in-person learning, receiving their first doses of the COVID vaccine, and reflecting on nearly a full year of wholly virtual learning practices. At that time, almost half of those surveyed considered leaving the profession because of the challenges of teaching during COVID. Over 75 percent of responding teachers indicated they were very uncomfortable with in-person learning in the absence of full teacher and student vaccination. A lot has changed since January 2021, but what this information tells the State Board is that teachers need and want safe school spaces for both themselves and their students.

[The most recent rates from DC Health](#) indicate that only 75 percent of D.C. residents ages 16–17 have completed a full-primary series of COVID vaccination. According to local education agency (LEA) guidance from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), [“all students age 16 and older are required to receive the primary series...of the COVID-19 vaccination for the](#)





44 start of the 2022–23 school year.” While students under age 16 are not currently required to be
45 vaccinated before the start of school, the rates for these age groups are also less than ideal,
46 especially for our Black student population. Only 59 percent of Black students ages 12–15 and
47 only 26 percent of Black students ages 5–11 have completed their primary vaccine series.
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49 The State Board strongly believes that vaccination continues to be the most powerful tool we have
50 to combat the ongoing pandemic. Just last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
51 (CDC) approved COVID vaccinations for younger children, recommending that anyone 6 months
52 and older should get vaccinated. Additionally, children 5 years of age and older should also get a
53 booster vaccination, if eligible.
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55 The State Board wants all students to be able to achieve educational success without worrying
56 about getting sick, or not being able to attend classes in-person every time there is a potential
57 COVID exposure in school. We understand that there are fears and misinformation circulating
58 about getting vaccinated. We also know that each family has individual health concerns and unique
59 factors that can influence this decision.
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61 Members of our Student Advisory Committee (SAC), one of whom you will be hearing from
62 shortly, report that students do not have the information about which sites and when at those sites
63 they are able to get vaccinated, are concerned about side effects and misinformation, and are fearful
64 of catching COVID in school or infecting younger siblings—who up until last week were ineligible
65 for COVID vaccination. Our three (3) Student Representatives, Liv Birnstad, Skye-Ali Johnson,
66 and Juliana Lopez, as well as the Student Advisory Committee (SAC) they all co-chair have been
67 hard at work advocating for and educating their peers on the benefits of getting vaccinated. I am
68 now going to turn it over to Student Representative Liv Birnstad.
69

70 Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Members of the Council of the District of Columbia, and staff. My
71 name is Liv Birnstad and I am a Student Representative on the D.C. State Board of Education and
72 a co-chair of the Student Advisory Committee (SAC). I am a rising senior at Capital City Public
73 Charter School. As part of the work of the SAC—which meets virtually the first and third Monday
74 of every month—we are working to debunk myths and inaccuracies around the COVID vaccine.
75 In our many discussions with students across the District, the SAC has found that the barrier for
76 many, is lack of information about the vaccine—resulting in inaction. Some students are concerned
77 about side effects, express distrust in the government, or think they will “*be fine*” without getting
78 vaccinated. And, while some of my peers believe in the efficacy of the vaccine, their guardians are
79 not allowing them to receive it. Others that may want to get vaccinated, say it is hard to find
80 vaccination sites that fit into their busy schedules to receive it.
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82 In April 2022, the SAC published a city-wide survey. Part of this survey asked students about their
83 biggest concern regarding COVID safety at their school. The responses were diverse in content
84 but one frequently received concern was about the lack of students—my peers—that were
85 vaccinated. Students noted that concerns regarding COVID and the vaccine were not only
86 manifesting in physical illness (i.e., getting COVID), but amplified emotional stress.





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88 The SAC wants to ensure that we are always fighting for *all* students regardless of their physical
89 abilities or health. This means that students who are immunocompromised, or live with someone
90 who is, should have equal access to be able to go to school in-person and not risk getting or
91 spreading severe illnesses (like COVID). As students, we know that the only way this is possible
92 is if as many students as possible are vaccinated before the start of the 2022–23 school year and
93 encouraged to follow other and all COVID safety procedures. At this time, the SAC is committed
94 to increased communications and social media campaigns about the importance of vaccinations
95 and COVID safety—we look forward to having you all follow along and engaging with us in this
96 work over the summer.

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98 In closing, the fact of the matter is that scientifically, the benefits of the COVID vaccination and
99 others largely outweigh the risks. We are happy to learn that the Mayor is making efforts to expand
100 vaccination sites around the city, making vaccination accessible to more residents, and we strongly
101 encourage families to take advantage of this opportunity before the start of the 2022–23 school
102 year.

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104 We want to thank the Council for this time and we are happy to answer any questions you may
105 have.

