

Councilmember Elissa Silverman
Pandemic Learning Emergency Act of 2020, Statement
December 15, 2020

How we ReOpen DCPS is one of the hardest decisions facing our city. Students learn best and educators teach best in-person in the classroom; to do that safely requires all DCPS partners to work together.

That's why I initially introduced this emergency bill, because trust was lacking among DCPS families and staff; there has been a lot of anger, finger-pointing, and frustration.

We heard from 10 students at a recent roundtable who all admitted struggles with remote learning but don't want to go back to their school building because they don't trust DCPS to keep them safe. I also have emails in my inbox right now from parents at Lafayette, Oyster, and Bancroft elementary schools who don't trust that DCPS is moving quick enough to help their students who are desperate to go back.

What both these groups have in common is that they don't feel that their voices are being heard and their questions being answered. They both say they don't have enough information from DCPS. They both don't trust DCPS is acting in the best interests of students. And there are staff members – not just teachers but nurses, teachers aides, principals, custodians – who say they learn much of what is going to happen in their schools from the news. And that deflates them.

This bill – and it is an emergency because I do believe this is urgent – was an effort to problem solve.

It created a Pandemic Advisory Learning Council, to give nurses, teachers, principals and other staff, as well as the Board of Education and parents a seat at the table with the Chancellor. This group would discuss at a system wide level issues like expanding outdoor learning, COVID vaccine requirements, and other issues that arise.

The bill also required testing. It asked for transparency in health data as well as in-person and virtual learning data.

Despite the finger-pointing and incendiary rhetoric I've heard from those against the bill, nothing slows down or creates an obstacle for reopening. Its heart is

cooperation and transparency, and it saddens me that is controversial and being mischaracterized as harmful.

Instead, I'm going to model the cooperation and trust I hope will happen. Since the emergency was first circulated, DCPS has addressed these issues in part. Chancellor Ferebee has agreed to bi-weekly meetings with the seven unions in DCPS. A first meeting with Mayor Bowser happened Nov. 20, and there has not been one since then, but I was just informed there is a tentative meeting tomorrow. I will be interested in progress on this. The Chancellor has also created the reopen community corps in every school to better coordinate at the ground level. Neither is a replacement for the Pandemic Advisory Learning Council, but it is a start.

The administration has also started posting some data that is required in this bill. That is another start.

And finally, DCPS has implemented a new testing policy that is above and beyond what is in our bill.

So as I mentioned in the breakfast, I was weighing what to do, and given that I want to work with the Chancellor, in a moment I will withdraw the measure.

But before I do that, I want to say: This should not be meeting for the sake of meetings or data for the sake of data, but real ways to build trust among staff, students and families. If it looks like the new bi-weekly meetings are box-checking exercises and not a way to provide input and discussion, or DCPS backtracks on any of these measures, I will consider reintroducing this legislation in the new year with the new Council.

Finally, I released this emergency as a discussion draft to talk about this important decision. It is hard decision, and hard decisions need to be talked about more, not less. I want to thank especially parents and union leaders for your feedback. I share your sense of urgency in returning our kids to the classroom, and I hope the coming months have us building trust and getting our DCPS community back to school safely.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I withdraw the bill.