

DC Families for COVID-Safer Schools

Deficiencies in Current DCPS Plan & Urgent Changes Needed

Background: We, a group of DC public school families, educators, and community members from all 8 Wards, share DCPS's belief that in-person learning is better for the vast majority of students, and we recognize the difficult challenges and trade-offs that will accompany any plan that allows for virtual learning beyond a very small number of students. However, we also know that the current plan does not adequately protect students, prevent disruption of learning for in-person students, or empower families. We propose eight specific and achievable changes to address these deficiencies.

Changes needed to the current DCPS COVID-Safety Plan to keep students safe, keep schools open, and empower families:

TESTING: DCPS aims to test 10-20% of unvaccinated kids weekly in each school. Evidence of presymptomatic and asymptomatic transmission, even in vaccinated people and particularly given the Delta variant, shows that we need responsive and universal testing to prevent the spread of infection in schools. Schools should (1) Implement rapid antigen testing for symptomatic students and staff, (2) Implement a rapid antigen testing test-to-stay program to reduce quarantine, (3) Speed up PCR result return times (to 6-18 hours) and test 100% of students each week with the asymptomatic PCR program. This will dramatically reduce the ability of Covid to spread in schools.

QUARANTINE: DCPS currently provides that kids will be required to quarantine if they have been in close contact with a student who tests positive. However, DCPS has changed the definition of "close contact" and says that a student who is within 3 to 6 feet of another student for longer than 15 minutes will not be considered a close contact if both students are wearing well-fitting masks and there are other mitigating factors in place like increased ventilation or physical distancing. DCPS already requires students to wear masks and says they are providing each classroom with additional filtration and each school with enhanced ventilation. Vaccinated individuals may be a close contact, but do not need to quarantine if they are asymptomatic; it is recommended, but not required that they test in 3-5 days. Finally, when a student tests positive for covid, siblings who live in the same household are not required to quarantine. Cumulatively, these policies have defined away much of the concept of a "close contact". These policies likely translate to too few students in quarantine, which is very likely to result in more transmission. Instead, full classes sharing an indoor space for more than 15 minutes should quarantine if anyone in the class tests positive, not only in preschool classrooms as is DCPS's current policy. While we share the goal of minimizing disruption to learning from quarantining, this adjusted policy will do much more to prevent infection and illness in our communities while ultimately preventing greater disruption resulting from longer closures necessitated by climbing infection rates. If the testing plan recommended above, including test to stay, is layered with these more robust quarantine guidelines, quarantine can then be more safely limited.

SAFER MEAL TIMES: The current plan permits indoor eating and provides insufficient funds or resources to support outdoor meals. As a result, at many schools, kids will eat indoors -- breakfast, lunch and snacks. Some will eat in classrooms, others in cafeterias. They will be unmasked with 20-60 other unmasked kids, and if they're in the cafeteria they'll also be breathing in air from other groups that were there before them. We know Delta spreads far and quickly indoors. The plan should require that kids eat outside, and DCPS needs to provide the resources and support to make this possible at every school. Multiple stakeholders stand ready to assist with creative, flexible and quickly achievable solutions to make this work and only a DCPS mandate will prevent the inequitable situation that currently exists: schools with more families with more personal resources are eating outside, while schools with more needs are forced to make due with inadequate resources and students are eating inside

VENTILATION AND FILTRATION: We know that ventilation and filtration are critical to mitigating risk within indoor spaces, especially given airborne transmission. Adequate (and therefore quiet) heating and cooling also matter, since they affect the distance and volume at which staff and children can communicate. These systems, as well as enhanced ventilation to mitigate aerosol transmission, are good in some schools and classrooms but absent, poor and/or broken in others. No indoor spaces should be

open to students until they have high quality ventilation of at least 5 air exchanges per hour, demonstrated by testing within rooms, not simply modeled.

MASKS: Similar to ventilation, high quality, properly fitted and consistently worn masks provide one of the most critical and effective means of reducing transmission and infection. DCPS policy currently calls for consistent masking by all. However, DCPS does not currently plan to provide quality, properly fitted masks/respirators to every student - such as KN95s - nor does it plan to provide resources for additional personnel to monitor and support proper masking by students at all times. DCPS should plan to provide a continuing supply of high quality, properly fitted masks/respirators and additional resources to support consistent use.

DATA REPORTING: DCPS should report data about staff and student cases in a timely manner, and report which classroom or cohort reports cases to the wider school community. In addition, DCPS should collect information on student vaccination and report aggregated information on vaccination status among all those present in a school community - staff and students - to inform DCPS and family/community assessment of transmission risk within each school. With data, the public can quickly assess whether DCPS's policies and mitigations are working to keep children safe. Without it, we'll have a school year of anxiety and rumors. Data should be reported daily, through established mechanisms on coronavirus.dc.gov, rather than sometimes taking many days to report school cases publicly as is currently the case. Individual school information on vaccinations, cases, and mitigations, including when routine HVAC maintenance is performed, should be reported in one place so families and educators can see the full picture of their school's full COVID-safety picture all at once. DC must not attempt to "hide the ball" with our children's health.

DISTANCING: With Covid being airborne and highly transmissible (increasingly so with new variants such as Delta), sharing indoor space is never completely without risk and we share DCPS's view that providing in-person learning is worth some degree of risk for most students. However, there are demonstrated and readily feasible ways to drastically reduce that risk. The current plan does not require distancing that will help to prevent or slow transmission within schools. Last year, DC required 6 feet of distancing among children, but this year simply *recommend* students be kept 3 feet apart when possible. There is no minimum distance this year because DC classrooms aren't large enough to hold 100% of enrolled students. We recognize the extreme challenge of ensuring adequate distance under these circumstances, but to provide an important layer of risk mitigation, DCPS should preserve the 3-foot distance requirement and provide additional staff and facilities, greater use of outdoor space, and/or additional virtual learning to enable such distancing.

VIRTUAL OPTION: The plan currently allows for virtual attendance only for students with a Medical Waiver based on very limited criteria; this approach fails to address quarantined students and the circumstances of many DC families during an evolving global pandemic and local public health emergency. All families need the option for their children to attend school virtually at least until they are eligible to be vaccinated or until the family determines that the benefits of in-person attendance justify the risks to their family. This approach will ultimately benefit those who attend school in person as well as those who learn virtually, as it will mean less transmission among those in school, fewer quarantines and closures, and less disruption of instruction. In addition, while student safety and family empowerment are most important, the virtual program should be as high quality as feasible, and where possible, offered through the student's school rather than the District.

For more information about this content and the DC Families for COVID-Safer Schools coalition that created it, email DCPS parent, Becky Reina, at becky.crouse@gmail.com.