



Durham Association of Educators
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Statement on School Reopening
November 13, 2020

At its Thursday, November 19th meeting, the Durham Board of Education will consider a proposal from DPS Superintendent Dr. Pascal Mubenga for a partial re-opening of Durham Public Schools. Under the proposal, which DPS is expected to release publicly on Tuesday, students in grades PreK through 5th grade would have the option to return for in-person instruction in small cohorts two days a week. Each class would be split into two cohorts. Cohort A would receive in-person instruction on Mondays and Tuesdays, while cohort B would be in person Thursday and Friday. While sixth and ninth graders would have the option to attend in-person on Wednesdays, most middle and high school students would remain online for the remainder of the school year. Additionally, all PreK-12th grade EC students in self-contained classrooms would report for in-person instruction five days a week. Under the proposed plan, elementary school families would have the option of choosing the online Ignite Academy for the remainder of the academic year, or returning to in-person learning.

The Durham Association of Educators supports the idea of safety-conscious families being able to choose online instruction for their students for the remainder of the school year. We believe that DPS staff should be given that same choice. As of this week, according to Dr. Mandy Cohen and statewide health experts, the rate of COVID-19 infection and spread is on the rise both in Durham and across the state. We worry that forcing staff to return to what they feel are unsafe learning conditions will undermine staff morale and lead to resignations.

Before voting on the details of any operational plan for re-opening, we believe the first steps should be establishing clearly defined health metrics that would govern a decision to re-open. The second step is to engage both staff and families on a personal level to identify which school workers and which families are willing to accept the risks of in-person school under the current conditions.

Dr. Mubenga and central office staff have done an excellent job of engaging with DAE to share information, seek our counsel, and answer hundreds of our questions on topics ranging from safety procedures to operational logistics and pedagogy. Members of the Board of Education have gone through a similar process of close and detailed communication with Dr. Mubenga, his staff, and medical experts. Those conversations are vital to understanding and assessing the risks and rewards related to re-opening. Yet most educators, students, and families across the district have not been invited into those conversations. We believe each person in our DPS family needs a way to hear first hand the medical and scientific assessment from the ABC

Collaborative, case studies showing what has happened in other districts that have reopened, and space to discuss and process the fears we have about staff and student safety.

Educators and staff throughout Durham Public Schools have worked harder than ever to support our students and families through the unprecedented challenge of remote learning. We have been trained in online instruction and are getting better at it every day. Yet as educators, we are painfully aware that students learn better and are more engaged through in person interactions. Kids need to be around other kids for their own social and emotional wellbeing. We yearn to be able to be in our classrooms with our students, to see their smiles, to watch them cringe when we tell a bad joke, to see the wheels turning in their brain as they begin to grasp new concepts.

While DAE cannot endorse a return to in-person learning while COVID-numbers are spiking, there are some elements of Dr. Mubenga's proposal that we like and other elements that we think need to be improved. As educators, our first responsibility is to the safety and wellbeing of our students. We understand that if children do not feel safe and secure, their minds will not be available to learn and process new information. ***In that spirit, these are our guiding principles for a safe and equitable re-opening:***

1. Schools should remain remote while COVID infection rates are above 3%.
2. Decisions should be based on health and safety assessments, not political pressure.
3. No staff member or student should be forced to choose between their health and their job or education; in person instruction should be something that staff and students opt into, not the default.
4. DPS should make a deep and lasting commitment to improved communication with staff and families. This should include:
 - a. real-time virtual engagement with all staff and families
 - b. a 21st century two-way text message communications system for use both at the district and school levels
 - c. additional interpretation staff to communicate complicated logistics and safety protocols to multilingual families.
5. Ensure that any staff working in person with students has an opportunity to take a break during the day, and that staff working with students either in person or online are not unduly burdened with administrative tasks.

Ultimately, it is the responsibility of Durham Public Schools to establish safety metrics and craft a plan that inspires confidence among staff, students, and families alike. In our view, the presentation of this plan by Dr. Mubenga should represent a starting point for community feedback and discussion. We are all in this together; we keep each other safe, and we have more work to do. We look forward to continued dialogue and collaboration to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our diverse and beloved community in this trying time.