

public citizens for children + youth

Testimony Presented to the School District of Philadelphia Board of Education
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Good evening,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to present this testimony.

I commend Dr. Hite and the School Board for completing the school district's reopening plan.

However, in the face of enormous uncertainties about the school year ahead, as a child advocacy organization, we want students and teachers to return to a high-quality learning day – that is accessible to all students yet prioritizes their health and safety.

Here are 3 key ideas to ensure a successful transition back-to-school.

First, our teachers must be prepared to teach all students when school starts.

We urge you to make the mental shift that schools will not likely be safe to return to in September. Students *will* be learning at home for much or all of the time.

Although many teachers have adapted to online instruction, they have not had enough training to ensure that they can actively and engagingly teach their students remotely. Starting now, teachers should be receiving comprehensive and robust professional development to ensure that they have the skill set to use online learning platforms, help students and their parents navigate lessons, virtually teach in real time and prepare lessons for students to watch later. They should also receive training on how to better assist our most vulnerable students – those with disabilities and English Language learners - and their parents.



Moreover, teachers need ongoing training to keep their skills fresh and our students learning all year long. School districts, like Broward County, Florida – the 6th largest school district in the country is already doing just this as they prepare to welcome students to virtual school this fall.

Second, our students, teachers and families' health and safety can not be compromised. Students should not go to school buildings unless science says it is safe to do so, everyone has on-site temperature checks before entering buildings, there is sufficient space to maintain social distancing, there are enough staff and products to rigorously clean and sanitize classrooms, all students and staff have access to handwashing and sanitizing stations, and students only participate in non-contact sports. I have submitted our full list of recommendations to ensure the health and safety of students and staff from PCCY and our Fund Our Facilities partners for your consideration.

Finally, I'm calling on testifiers, citizens of the city, and other community members to join PCCY in demanding more money for schools from the federal government. We are repulsed that the federal government is threatening to withhold funds from schools that aren't ready or equipped to physically open in the fall. Moreover, school districts like Philadelphia simply do not have enough staff to comply with current safe distancing requirements. It is a disgrace to keep desperately needed funds from school districts when they are needed to train teachers, get students online, keep them learning, *and* implement the necessary protocols in buildings and classrooms to keep students and staff safe.

We must all do our part by contacting our federal law makers and demanding that federal dollars get distributed to public schools whether they are operating virtually, using a hybrid model or in person.

Yes, the road ahead is difficult. But, it is not impossible. With teacher and staff training, common sense solutions to protect the health and safety of our school communities and adequate funds to properly implement them, Philly – together, we can do this!



PHILLY CAN DO THIS!

1. **First Rule – Do No Harm!** – Schools should re-open for *in-person* instruction when the science indicates that that opening with reasonable protocols does not put children, school personnel and the families of all students and school personnel at the heightened risk of COVID infection.
2. **No Matter What - All Students Must Continue to Learn!** – The plan envisions providing every family with the choice of homebased instruction. The instruction must be high quality and engaging for every student including ELL and SPED students. Further, the District must deploy significantly more training to help our teachers become highly effective at delivering engaging, remote instruction.
3. **Parents Must Have Confidence in Health Protocols - Mandatory Temperature Screening, Sanitizing and Social Distancing Will Save Lives!** – Every student and all school personnel must be required to comply with on-site temperature checks upon entering school every day. A voluntary system of compliance will not give parents or staff the needed confidence to promote in-school attendance. When a person has a temperature, a designated isolation space must be available until the person leaves the school building. Classrooms and hallways need to be outfitted with sanitizing dispensers for students and staff to regularly use in accordance with best practices recommended by the CDC. Further, the district's rostering plan must be developed with explicit instructions that students are assigned to class and activity rooms that permit six feet of social distancing when the rooms are in use for the rostered activities.
4. **Schools Must Meet the Highest Standards of Cleaning and Sanitizing!** – In order to meet the stringent cleaning protocols aligned with the CDC and EPA guidance and the district must hire additional staff to keep schools clean and sanitary. Further, the district must create a transparent system of communicating to parents in real time that cleaning protocols, are being met in accordance with CDC and EPA guidance. Based on the challenges the District has faced with ensuring buildings are cleaned regularly, significantly improved training, oversight and support of all building maintenance staff is a necessary predicate for re-opening.

5. **Parents need Predictability and Standard Responses in the Case of Infection are a Must!** – Simple directives must be released before the start of school so that parents know whether instruction will continue in-school or shift to home-based instruction should an employee or student test positive for COVID.
6. **Air Quality Problems Must Be Avoided!** – Where there is no reliable and highly functioning ventilation in any room or school building, the policy must clearly state there will be no instruction or school activities in those rooms or buildings. In addition, any school space known to contain hazardous asbestos, lead or other containments that put staff and/students at risk, must not be used for instruction or activities, at all.
7. **Traveling to/from School Students Must Be Protected from Infection!** – For students who must ride public transit to get to and from school, SEPTA, the City, and the District should mobilize its staff resources and volunteers, so that students can ride transit safely with assurance that the transit system is appropriately sanitized.
8. **In All Spaces, Keep Our Students and Families Safe from Infection!** – While it is important for students to be active and stay outside as much as possible, athletic activities involving contact sports should be suspended. Alternatively, schools should offer students non-contact sport options (i.e. baseball, track and field, tennis, etc.) and other extra-curricular activities to keep them physically and mentally active.
9. **Keep Parents and Stakeholders in the Loop!** – Provide weekly public briefings on progress toward readiness for opening, and once schools open, staff a hotline where parents or staff to report problems; and announce all committees and committee chairs managed by the District or the School Board so that parents and key stakeholders can access information and share updates or problems.
10. **Funding Will Be Key!** Engage every Philadelphian to demand more Federal and State funds to support the educational needs of our children while keeping our communities safe from COVID. At a state level, this includes, but is not limited to, the distribution of the \$100M in unallocated CARES funding. At a federal level, this includes, but is not limited to the passage of the HEROES Act, which will bring more than \$3B in critically needed funding for K12 education.

We recognize that the best efforts made by our teachers, parents and students to continue instruction and protect public safety depend on federal and state action and resources and well-crafted local plans to ensure that any reopening considerations do not jeopardize the lives of our community members.