

Congress of the United States

Washington, D.C. 20515

January 14, 2021

Dr. Lewis Ferebee
Chancellor
District of Columbia Public Schools
1200 First Street, NE
Washington, DC 20002

Ms. Elizabeth A. Davis
President
Washington Teachers' Union
1329 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE
Washington, D.C. 20003

Dear Dr. Ferebee and Ms. Davis:

We are writing to request information about the District of Columbia's (D.C.) failure to reopen schools. It is critical that schools reopen safely and quickly to help students and families succeed in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies show that remote learning is harmful for students' long-term academic and professional success and in the short term can cause mental and physical harm.¹ Additionally, keeping students at home exacerbates challenges faced by working families who lack access to adequate child care. While the safety concerns are significant, there are numerous examples of schools safely reopening, including charter schools in D.C.² It is unacceptable that the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and the Washington Teachers' Union (WTU) have failed to put students first by working together to safely reopen the schools in D.C.

As outlined in a recent *Washington Post* article,³ reopening efforts for DCPS appear to be plagued by poor planning, poor communication, and aggressive obstruction that has put the

¹ REOPENING K-12 SCHOOLS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: PRIORITIZING HEALTH, EQUITY, AND COMMUNITIES, THE NAT'L ACADEMIES OF SCIENCES, ENGINEERING & MEDICINE (Jul. 15, 2020), <https://www.nationalacademies.org/event/07-15-2020/report-release-reopening-k-12-schools-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-prioritizing-health-equity-and-communities>.

² Perry Stein & Laura Meckler, *How D.C. and its teachers, with shifting plans and demands, failed to reopen schools*, THE WASH. POST (Jan. 2, 2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/washington-dc-failed-school-reopening/2021/01/02/af6d6b56-2532-11eb-952e-0c475972cfc0_story.html.

³ Perry Stein & Laura Meckler, *How D.C. and its teachers, with shifting plans and demands, failed to reopen schools*, THE WASH. POST (Jan. 2, 2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/washington-dc-failed-school-reopening/2021/01/02/af6d6b56-2532-11eb-952e-0c475972cfc0_story.html.

needs of adults in the system above those of students and families. It appears DCPS has failed to put forward a coherent plan informed by thorough community engagement, and the WTU has repeatedly blocked reopening efforts by negotiating in bad faith and advancing unreasonable demands that go well beyond even the American Federation of Teachers' recommendations. As a result, parents are confused and frustrated.

In October, Mayor Muriel Bowser noted a sharp drop in students meeting literacy benchmarks.⁴ Data released by DCPS in October showed the achievement gap widening in D.C. between white students and students of color.⁵ Nonetheless, the plan that was in its final stages to bring 7,000 at-risk elementary students back to classrooms on November 9 was rejected by the teachers' union.

Many families rely on the school system for support in addition to academics. Schools provide meals, can help families access other assistance if needed, and serve as a safety check for students in need. We know that reports of abuse and neglect have dropped significantly since schools have closed,⁶ which means children are stuck in harm's way while the adults in charge fail to reopen schools.

If we are to "follow the science," we should do it consistently, and we should do it even when teachers' unions protest returning to work. Overwhelmingly, data shows that school spread does not meet or exceed community spread. "Data gathered worldwide are increasingly suggesting that schools are not hot spots for coronavirus infections."⁷ "[E]ven in places where community infections were on the rise, outbreaks in schools were uncommon, particularly when precautions were taken to reduce transmission."⁸

Congress has provided significant funds to help the reopening of all schools across the country. More than \$67 billion have been provided to help schools reopen safely, including covering the costs of cleaning supplies, air purifiers, and materials necessary to support appropriate social distancing.⁹ Rather than use these funds to reopen schools safely, unions and public school systems have focused more attention on lobbying against helping students attend private schools than they have managed to open and educate students in a safe environment. To help understand why DCPS has yet to announce a full reopening plan, we request both of you provide information on the following:

⁴ Perry Stein, *D.C. Mayor Points to Learning Loss in Urging Schools to Reopen as City and Union Fail to Reach Agreement*, THE WASH. POST (Oct. 22, 2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/dc-mayor-points-to-learning-loss-in-urging-schools-to-reopen-as-city-and-union-fail-to-reach-agreement/2020/10/22/93f72094-146e-11eb-ad6f-36c93e6e94fb_story.html.

⁵ Perry Stein, *In D.C., Achievement Gap Widens, Early Literacy Progress Declines During Pandemic, Data Show*, THE WASH. POST (Oct. 30, 2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/data-indicate-worsening-early-literacy-progress-and-widening-achievement-gap-among-district-students/2020/10/30/bebe2914-1a25-11eb-82db-60b15c874105_story.html.

⁶Dr. Sanchari Sinha Dutta, Ph.D., *250,000 cases of child abuse or neglect may have gone unreported in U.S. COVID Pandemic*, Nov. 2020.

⁷ Dyani Lewis, *Why Schools Probably Aren't COVID Hotspots*, NATURE (2020), <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02973-3>.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ PL 116-136, section 18003; PL 116-260, Division M, section 313.

1. Who in the D.C. government has the final say in reopening the schools?
2. How many meetings occurred between the city and the WTU to discuss the reopening?
3. How many meetings took place between the city and principals, school leaders, or the Council of School Officers to discuss reopening?
4. What was the communication plan for informing and seeking feedback from parents?
5. How did DCPS engage principals in their reopening plans?
6. Did DCPS consider the October 2020 reopening plan that was cited in the *Washington Post* article to be a final deal? Did the WTU consider that plan to be a final deal? Why or why not?
7. What steps must be completed for schools to successfully reopen as currently planned in early February?
8. What data is DCPS relying on to help make the determination about reopening schools?
9. Under what specific conditions is the WTU willing to return to work?

Please provide written responses to these questions by January 29, 2021.

If you have any questions and for periodic updates, please contact Mandy Schaumburg (mandy.schaumburg@mail.house.gov), with the Committee on Education and Labor or Committee on Oversight and Government Reform staff at (202) 225-5074 to discuss this request further.

Sincerely,



Virginia Foxx
Ranking Member
Committee on Education and Labor



James Comer
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Reform

Cc: The Honorable Robert C. Scott, Chairman
Committee on Education and Labor

The Honorable Carolyn Maloney, Chairwoman
Committee on Oversight and Reform