



**Testimony of
Dr. Michelle Walker-Davis, Executive Director
DC Public Charter School Board**

**SY21-22 Reopening Hearing
Committee of the Whole
September 21, 2021**

Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's school reopening hearing. I am Dr. Michelle Walker-Davis, Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board.

I would like to begin by recognizing the hard work that went into reopening all our school buildings for full time in-person learning. Each school has worked tirelessly for months to prepare buildings and to create layered COVID mitigation plans. To prepare for reopening, schools updated their HVAC systems, reworked daily schedules, procured PPE, and some created outdoor lunch, and learning spaces. Some public charter LEAs also opened weeks earlier than usual to provide extra time to rebuild relationships and make up for interrupted instruction. School leaders and staff have been adapting their plans to respond to the evolving guidance. Teachers and staff have been nimble as they craft their lessons to meet the needs of students in their classrooms and those quarantining. While it has been a very challenging beginning to the year, ultimately, it has been great to see students back in-person bonding with their peers and teachers.

Despite all this hard work and excitement, we know schools still face many challenges. In the spring, we thought we would be starting this school year in a different public health context. Cases were declining, the rates of infection and transmission among children were low, and the vaccination rates were starting to increase. Unfortunately, with the delta variant becoming the dominant strain over the summer, much of the return to normal our schools had hoped and planned for has stalled. Families are understandably concerned and anxious about their unvaccinated children. And vaccinated staff and students are worried about breakthrough infections. We have seen the case rates increase across the region, and we know those who are not vaccinated are especially vulnerable.

To address these factors, schools are doing their best to interpret health guidance and implement multi-layered safety plans with fidelity to mitigate risk and ease concerns of families and staff. Schools are collaborating with one another and sharing best practices to constantly improve their plans and operations.

And schools are adapting protocols to keep up with the evolving guidance. The flexibility afforded to LEAs in the interpretation of the guidance has put a lot of pressure and tough decisions on school leaders. Some of that flexibility, intended to account for the unique characteristics of each school community, has made it difficult to explain protocols and procedures to families to get them comfortable with safety plans.

We also hear contact tracing needs to improve. Currently, contact tracing is done at the individual school level by the school staff, based on guidance from DC Health and with support from OSSE. This process is burdensome, taxing already stressed educators, including those at our state education agency, whose primary focus should be on teaching and learning.

OSSE is taking steps to address the challenges and concerns we have heard from LEAs, and DC PCSB is working with them through that process. We can all agree that contact tracing needs to move quickly so communication can go out to families as soon as possible; everyone wants this to operate well. To that end, we look forward to more and better coordination with DC Health to ensure an efficient and effective contact tracing program that alleviates the existing burden. Continued improvement will be key to building trust with the community and ensuring students are receiving a quality education. We know schools can meet this moment, but it is important to acknowledge how much they have taken on.

Ultimately, we know the most effective way to keep people safe and create a stable school environment is to increase vaccinations. Vaccinations keep students and staff in schools and out of quarantines. They are extremely effective at preventing severe illness and minimize risk of contracting COVID. We are pleased that the city is requiring vaccinations for school staff. This will go a long way in curbing the impact of COVID-19 on education. Public charter schools have been out in front of this issue and have been emphasizing the importance of the vaccine to communities for months. At least 18 public charter LEAs mandated the vaccine for their staff members or achieved a 100% vaccination rate prior to the mayor's announcement. And many of our LEAs already have staff vaccination rates above 85%.

I want to emphasize the need to address vaccine hesitancy along with the mandate. There is already a staffing shortage and many vacancies in public schools across the region. Some school leaders know they have staff members who are reluctant to receive the vaccine. One school reported losing seven staff members once they imposed a requirement. Leaders do not want to lay off staff which means we all need to address hesitancy and get employees to a point where they feel comfortable receiving the vaccine.

Overall, we support the vaccine mandate, but we know there are concerns that will need to be addressed to minimize employee turnover.

The same can be said for students. We want to see as many eligible students vaccinated as possible. We also know there are large disparities in vaccine uptake among youth in different wards. Just as with adults in the city, we will need to address the concerns that teens and their families have about the vaccine. LEAs have been doing all they can to encourage students to receive the vaccine. All schools have connected students to vaccine resources, and 22 public charter LEAs participate in the vaccine exchange program. Ultimately, school buildings will be even safer, and operations will be smoother with high rates of vaccination across the city.

Lastly, the city needs to continue to focus on routine childhood immunizations. Public charter schools continue to emphasize their importance to families. LEAs worked with the city this summer to prop up immunization clinics at schools and to promote medical events for students. No Shots No Schools states that students must submit their up-to-date medical certificate within the first 20 days of school to continue attending. Many schools are about 20 days into the school year, and some have already been in school for more than a month. We want to ensure all students have the appropriate immunizations so we can keep them in classrooms and safe from infections. Schools would greatly appreciate increased utilization of mobile vaccination vans and sites. As much as we can, we must continue to limit the barriers to medical access and make submission of the certificate as easy as possible to set schools and students up for success.

Looking forward, we know some of these challenges will persist, but with layered mitigation strategies, vaccinations, and coordination across education and city agencies, we can keep kids safely in school and learning.

I am now going to turn it over to the leaders of Rocketship and AppleTree public charter schools to give you an on the ground view of how their schools have navigated reopening safely.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.