



CITY OF CHICAGO
CITY COUNCIL

COUNCIL CHAMBER
CITY HALL ROOM 200
121 NORTH LASALLE STREET
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60602

SENT ELECTRONICALLY VIA EMAIL

Honorable Lori Lightfoot
Mayor, City of Chicago
121 North LaSalle Street, 5th Floor
Chicago, Illinois 60602

Dr. Janice Jackson
Chief Executive Officer, Chicago Public Schools
42 West Madison Street
Chicago, Illinois 60602

January 3, 2021

Dear Mayor Lightfoot and Dr. Jackson:

As elected representatives of our communities—and many of us CPS parents ourselves—we appreciate that our public schools are a critical provider of social services for young Chicagoans, and that COVID-19 has posed unique and significant challenges for our most vulnerable students that will be felt for years to come. We recognize that educators worked tirelessly to make remote learning last semester as enriching as possible for students, and understand the stress that this learning environment places on many working families, as parents simultaneously juggle childcare and work responsibilities. However, we are deeply concerned that Chicago Public Schools' current plan for students and staff to return to school buildings does not meet the district's objective of increasing equity for students, and fails to adequately address a number of safety concerns identified by parents, students, and staff in light of the ongoing pandemic.

During an October briefing for elected officials, CPS discussed enrollment data showing a lack of online engagement from our city's most vulnerable students. CPS also pointed to survey data indicating that parents of African American and Latino students conveyed a strong interest in enrolling their students in in-person learning. But CPS's current reopening plan has not won the confidence of many of these parents. In the most recent CPS survey, less than a quarter of CPS families opted for in-person learning. Equally distressing is the fact that the families of white students indicated an intention to enroll their children in in-person learning at twice the rate of families of African American and Latino students (67.5% versus 33.9% and 31.0%, respectively).

In order to better provide for a safe return to in-person learning that has the trust of families and educators alike, we respectfully urge CPS to take the following steps:

1. Establish and promote clear public health criteria for reopening, and share a detailed testing and contact-tracing plan. The safety-related metrics with which our constituents are most familiar relate to the positivity rate (currently hovering near 9%) and the daily number of new cases (regularly exceeding 1,000). These numbers do not adequately account for the neighborhood-specific hotspots where COVID-19 struggles are most pronounced (the positivity rate in 60632, for example, currently exceeds 16%). Moreover, these numbers may well increase in the coming weeks and continue to exceed the benchmarks of 5% positivity and 400 new cases to which our city's public health leaders pointed earlier this year as warranting concern. In addition, our constituents are less familiar with CPS's new benchmark of infections doubling in fewer than 18 days, nor are they conversant about CPS's testing and contract-tracing plans for educators and students.
2. Improve the technology infrastructure to which students have access—notably, the internet connectivity for all students participating in remote learning. We have heard from many families who have struggled mightily to obtain the requisite internet connectivity and devices, in part because CPS waited until December to announce expanded eligibility for no-cost, high speed internet.
3. Reduce screen time, especially for students in early grades, and increase opportunities for learning that do not rely largely or solely on access to technology. Such opportunities include arts-and-crafts projects that reinforce what students are learning in other subject areas like history and reading; building structures using available household items such as legos, blocks, paper, and/or cardboard; and scavenger hunts in- or outside of the home where feasible.
4. Strengthen the planning around hybrid learning, particularly for classrooms in which CPS anticipates remote and in-person learning to occur simultaneously.
5. Engage principals, local school councils, and other school-based leaders to ensure that individual schools are able to adopt guidelines and protocols that reflect their unique needs.
6. Provide social workers, speech therapists, and other clinicians with adequate advanced notice regarding which of their students will be available to them remotely, in-person, or both, and prioritize scheduling that allows these clinicians to maintain their existing caseload of students and to sanitize equipment and rooms as needed. In addition, CPS should ensure that these clinicians are subject to the guidelines issued by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, at least in part to protect against the use of basements, hallways, and other poorly ventilated areas for providing services.
7. Provide decisions regarding educators' applications for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or non-ADA accommodations timely and transparently, as well as provide clearer guidelines regarding when and under what circumstances CPS will seek to roll back those accommodations.

8. Provide clearer guidelines for decision-making regarding paid leave rights under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and other relevant laws and regulations so that educators who are also parents can make their own childcare arrangements promptly.
9. Provide regular, public updates on the pace of hiring the 2,000 new employees who are to assume various pandemic-related responsibilities.

Finally, we believe that the current plans for remote and in-person instruction will be improved through greater collaboration between CPS and the Chicago Teachers Union, based on guidance from the Illinois State Board of Education. Our city's educators know first-hand the challenges that students are facing, and should be a co-equal partner in crafting a reopening plan that is feasible and safe, and that prevents burnout during these challenging times. We have been alarmed to see, read, and hear consistent testimony from educators expressing their profound frustration with the status quo and how it hinders their ability to do their job. Accordingly, we ask that you improve upon existing instructional models through additional, fulsome collaboration and bargaining with CTU.

A successful reopening plan must inspire public trust through transparency, communication, and collaboration. To that end, CPS needs true buy-in from and collaboration with parents, communities, and organized labor. We believe that CPS can achieve this, and stand ready to assist however we can.

Sincerely,

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