

**Testimony of  
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June 17, 2020  
Pennsylvania House Education Committee Hearing on School Re-  
Opening for the 2020-21 School Year**

Good Morning. First, let me start by saying “thank you” to Chairman Sonney, Chairman Roebuck and members of the House Education committee for holding today’s hearing and for including me in this dialogue regarding the reopening of schools after the COVID-19-forced closures. My name is Larry Jones, and I am the CEO for Richard Allen Preparatory Charter School in Philadelphia. I am here today on behalf of our employees and - most importantly - on behalf of our students and their families. I am also representing the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools (PCPCS) and all of the 143,000 charter students and their families across the Commonwealth.

As is often the case, our most vulnerable community members have been disproportionately affected by both the virus and school closures. As we prepare for the reopening of the commonwealth’s schools, it is important to address potential obstacles and ensure concrete guidance for schools. At the same time, we must utilize this crisis as a kick start for bringing new innovations to educational practices.

The time for school reopening has been eagerly anticipated by parents, educators and students alike. Our plans for this process are dependent upon identifying successes and challenges in the initial response to the closure. It is vital that an assessment of challenges encountered during the COVID-19 closure be examined. One major barrier involves the Intermediate Unit and charter school relationship. Charter schools do not have the same access, representation or interaction with their Intermediate Units (IU) as districts. Accordingly, the flow of information and technical assistance from PDE was not as robust as districts. This is especially true for Philadelphia charter schools that have historically received little if any support from the IU #26, despite charter students accounting for part of the IU funding. Also, charters often do not have large reserve budgets, resulting in the costs of transitioning being much more impactful for charter schools. Despite these barriers, across the state charters were able to transition faster and more efficiently than many districts. Charter flexibility has resulted in many schools utilizing staff members in various ways to further engage children during this difficult time. For example, at the school where I’m employed every child was assigned a Virtual Advisor who made contact with each child and/or parent at least once weekly. This was in addition to teachers and other staff who would normally engage children.

Many districts and charter schools began the closure with some version of work packets or instructional review for children, which allowed for planning and preparation for virtual and distance learning. In areas serving socioeconomically disenfranchised families, providing access to technology and high-speed internet became a top priority. Next, brick-and-mortar schools had to pivot from traditional learning environments to a virtual environment. This required identification of learning platforms, training staff, development of standards for

participation/engagement, and figuring out how to monitor academic progress and attendance. Local Educational Agencies (LEA) developed Continuity of Education Plans and began providing instruction of new material. Our school began full virtual education during the first week of April, with instruction of new material taking place the following week.

In Philadelphia, there was a rush to provide Chromebooks and internet access for students in need. The School District of Philadelphia secured emergency funding for approximately 50,000 Chromebooks and charter schools received philanthropic support to allow for almost 15,000 devices to be deployed in addition to current inventory. After acquisition, safe distribution of Chromebooks was the next challenge. At our school, we provided Chromebooks to serve 40 percent of our students via a drive thru/walk-up distribution system. However, not all students were able to access technology or online learning. Engagement has been varied across communities and sectors. A survey of 117 Philadelphia charter and Diocesan schools indicates participation rates of 78 percent for K-3, 80 percent for grades 4-8, and 69 percent for high school students. In comparison, the School District of Philadelphia reported 48 percent of K-8 students and 73 percent of high school students participated. However, there is neither a uniform measure nor understanding of participation/engagement that has been established or provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). Many LEA's utilize work completion to measure participation, while others use actual Zoom/virtual synchronous logins. There is even a combination of parent/student text, email, login, and phone calls used to measure participation. At my school, when using a work completion model, 84 percent of our students are participating (not including students with disabilities who are working directly with staff in other modalities). When utilizing actual contact (text, email, phone, logins, etc.) our participation is 99 percent.

Along with academic programming, the closure has shown gaps in social and supportive services provided by public charter and district schools. Many children count on schools for food service on a daily basis. Philadelphia charter schools have provided over 580,000 meals to community members since the closure began. Schools are also finding ways to provide socialization, emotional support and guidance services to children. Brick and mortar schools are not set up nor equipped to provide health services, nor can they be the watchful eyes to prevent or report abuse of children in a virtual environment. Ultimately, a return to school is a return to normalcy and safety for our children, and as such that return must be done in a thoughtful, measured and safe manner.

As a school operator, reopening schools presents challenges for all stakeholders. Making the transition back to physical classrooms can best be accomplished by planning from the perspectives of our students, their families and actual school operators. Each of these depends upon the guidelines, restrictions, and policies put in place for schools by state and local agencies.

Student concerns and obstacles give way to the potential risks for reopening of schools. A short list of issues to plan for include:

- The ability for children to effectively social distance during school sessions: The age of students and educational environment will determine success of social distancing, with middle and high schoolers presumably being better situated than young elementary school children. This includes the precautions such as hand washing and the wearing of masks, if mandated. Social distancing issues can be mitigated by limiting the number of children in classrooms/schools at a specific time, but this would necessitate flexible scheduling and some level of ongoing virtual learning. For example, students attending school twice per week would need virtual learning for the other days. One area that

presents an issue for student social distancing is transportation. Monitoring and enforcing social distancing on school buses could be problematic.

- Like adults, students have abandoned their normal school time schedules, with many students staying up later and sleeping more than they would otherwise. Reorienting students to daily schedules will be another consideration, especially if the possibility of flexible scheduling in the fall exists.
- Overcoming the summer slide is often a difficult task for children and families. This year, the summer academic loss will be exponentially greater. Schools and parents will need to start planning for summer and fall enrichment and remediation opportunities now. Again, whether or not this programming will be face-to-face or virtual depends upon how and when full reopening takes place. Schools with 21<sup>st</sup> Century programs and those with the resources to provide rich summer and afterschool programming will have a benefit in this regard. Additionally, access to technology and supplemental educational resources will also aid in the bridging of the learning gap caused by the school closures. Herein lies another question of equity and access, with children who lack resources and/or attending schools with limited resources having less opportunity for remediation. Unfortunately, these are the most vulnerable children who are typically saddled with existing academic deficiencies. This is an equity issue.
- Adults are having a difficult time sorting out the facts related to COVID-19. Our students are often exposed to news reports and adult conversations that are oftentimes inaccurate or present conflicting information. This uncertainty is causing fear, confusion and anxiety in many of our children. We must prepare for some children being afraid or misinformed when they return to school. Schools will have to figure out how to plan for support of these children, given the limited instructional time that will be available. Providing simple information to children prior to reopening (summer months) is needed. Ensuring schools are receiving timely, accurate and consistent information is vital, as well.
- Brick and mortar schools do not have the systems or expertise in place to assess or identify instances of abuse while students are away from school. It would be unwise to assume that instances of abuse simply ceased to occur. Rather, many children may be experiencing trauma or difficult issues that are going unreported. Working with these children upon their re-entry to school is important.

The success of school reopening for students is directly linked to how well prepared their families feel returning to schools. Communicating and working with parents will be key in a successful reopening.

- Unless there is a full return to school (all students, five days per week), parents and families may experience difficulties with childcare and supervision. Any flexible scheduling may also require virtual learning. If parents have returned to work, supervision during this learning will be limited and may impact student engagement.
- Many families have experienced economic hardship as a result of the Commonwealth's closure. The ability to have students prepared for school in September is already difficult for many families living in poverty. The financial impact of lost wages due COVID-19 will make school preparation challenging. Plans for obtaining school supplies, school uniforms and other necessities may be a problem for families. Schools should plan for flexibility and support for children.
- Without a vaccine in place, many families may also fear returning their children to school until they feel children will be safe from COVID-19 infection in school. This will impact truancy/attendance policies and student learning.

The ultimate burden of school reopening planning falls upon our schools. School planning will have to focus on a variety of planning challenges:

- Instructional gaps experienced by students due to COVID-19 will be massive, especially among economically disadvantaged and historically disenfranchised groups. Planning for summer programming, differentiated instruction, remediation, and supplemental education is needed. Schools and districts must identify and allocate funds and resources for this programming. Federal dollars have been committed and more is anticipated, however, we must ensure that funds are distributed fairly based upon student need rather than type of school.
- Planning for the reopening of school is entirely dependent upon the restrictions and guidelines from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), state and local health departments and other regulatory agencies. Without having concrete guidance, planning will be hit or miss for many schools. Schools and districts with less resources (financial and human) may have more difficulty in planning. PDE must ensure that information is timely and comprehensive in order for our teams to be able to adequately plan for the return to school. Many schools, especially smaller independently operated schools do not have the large administrative structure needed to engage in summer, pandemic and reopening planning without placing strain on the entire school system.
- Current guidance suggests the use of cloth face masks for students and staff. Schools will need to acquire sufficient amounts of masks and disposable masks (for children/adults who forget masks), increased cleaning and hygiene materials, and other materials that support reduction of virus spread.
- Temperature screenings for students and staff upon entry may be necessary. If so, acquiring equipment or developing protocols to safely isolate sick or feverish school community members will be necessary.
- Protection of students and staff members who are among more vulnerable groups (older, compromised immune systems, and/or underlying conditions) will also be necessary. Attendance and staffing supports will need to be considered. For example, our school employs fifty-seven (57) individuals. Of that number seventeen (17) or 30 percent are in one of the vulnerable groups. Isolating these staff members would require creative scheduling, staffing and planning. It should be assumed that other entities would have similar numbers, especially in district schools that traditionally have older staff members than charters.
- Suggested social distancing may require schools to have A/B schedules with students working in cohorts. Cohorts would attend school two to three days per week. Such cohorts would require that classes be socially distanced, staff be deployed differently, and group processes like feeding and transportation tweaked to maintain social distancing.
- Schools will also need to ensure access to technology for students and staff members. Additionally, planning for rigorous and engaging virtual lessons that either supplant or support brick-and-mortar instruction is important. In Pennsylvania, we are fortunate enough to have several cyber charter schools that have been providing virtual education for many years. We would be wise to divorce ourselves from political positions and seek true collaboration to ensure reopening is done best for all students.
- How we develop and maintain healthy social connections in schools will change depending upon our scheduling structures. It should be noted that cohorts of smaller students working predominantly with one or two teachers may actually be better for social connections among peers and adults.

In closing, I want to again thank you for the opportunity to testify today on this important topic. I'm happy to make myself available to the committee to answer any questions you may have regarding public education.

Thank you.