

Public Hearing on the Continuity of Learning Plan 4.0
Virtual Special Called School Board Meeting
July 10, 2020
Comments from Sharon Widmayer

To the Board of Alexandria City Public Schools:

In regard to the district's planning for a return to school, I would like to share my views as both a parent and as a teacher in another district. I think that we all believe that in ideal circumstances, distance learning is not a substitute for what we normally consider face-to-face learning. In addition, for some students, school may be their only safe space and their teacher may be their most trusted adult. Third, many families also have legitimate concerns about childcare as parents start to return to their work places.

However, the reality is that, with current conditions, as much as we yearn to return to normal, we cannot return to the classroom and teach like we did last January. Arguments that compare face-to-face instruction pre-pandemic with distance learning in order to argue for a return to school buildings are not comparing apples to apples. A return to school this fall must take into account the need to prevent COVID-19 infections and spread. It will be premised upon social distancing, masks, frequent cleanings, limits on type of furniture and materials used in the classroom, and limits on movement throughout the building. This is an extremely different environment from what school looked like last January. Therefore, I urge the board to look carefully at science, listen to teachers, and think clearly about what is in fact possible and what is above all safe.

I would urge you to take the following steps:

1. **Prioritizing safety and health of all.** This means that ACPS needs to follow all CDC and WHO guidelines. There needs to be adequate PPE on hand for any face to face interactions, social distancing protocols and space to social distance, widespread use of outdoor spaces and adequate ventilation in all in door spaces. Masks will need to be mandatory (as developmentally appropriate) for all face to face interactions, especially indoors, and there would need to be clear and robust policies in place for any student who does not want to wear a mask.

A face to face return to school would also have to limit the number of contacts for each member of the school community, which means a serious rethinking of specials in elementary schools, where staff in a typical week come in contact with virtually everyone in the building, and the way that secondary school classes, especially high school classes are scheduled. Even if students are in two groups that attend every other day, a typical high school student with an 8-period schedule still would risk exposing eight teachers and 120 students if he/she came into school unknowingly having COVID.

There are also additional safety concerns about limiting adults in a building when it comes to things such as substitute coverage (subs often work in multiple buildings and may cover for multiple classes/ teachers) and what happens if no substitutes are available (are those kids added to other classes, making those classes larger?).

In addition, it is always a problem that kids come to school sick when their parents misread or do not notice their symptoms. Teachers also often work when they are sick and cannot get a sub

or do not have leave. This needs to be taken into consideration when planning any Face to Face instruction.

Finally, I urge you to remember that although children may be less likely to be at risk of death or serious illness, the risk is not zero and increases with age. In addition, schools are also full of teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff. Many of these teachers and staff members are over age fifty and/or have risk factors. Quality instruction will not be possible when teachers are stressed and worried about their own health.

2. **Recognize that Face to Face instruction that is possible now is not the Face to Face instruction we had last fall.** Let me describe just a couple typical activities that take place in my classroom (secondary English Language) on a regular basis. To make sure that students are actively engaged in learning in my classroom, they frequently work in small groups with other students. They may be passing markers back and forth while taking turns writing things on the same table-top white board. They might be lining up to create a “human timeline,” sitting next to each other to play Quizlet as a team with their laptops. With a partner, they could be sorting cards into categories. They could be choosing a book from my in-class library to read with a partner and discuss. These types of activities cannot happen in my classroom with students socially distant and me unable to circulate around the classroom and interact closely with them. What can I do to foster a sense of community and add interactivity to my classroom given the requirements of social distancing? I can use an app that lets students write, draw, or move things around on their computer screens during a slide presentation and then I can click to show what individual students wrote to the class or how the whole class voted on something. I can have them work together to make a slide presentation over the internet from their seats instead of making a poster together. I can use other apps to have them choose electronic texts to read instead of congregating at the classroom library to choose books, chat with students to get information from different texts they read, or even write a dialogue together. In short, as a secondary school teacher, I feel that the quality of instruction, interaction, and engagement will be better via online learning rather than face to face. As the parent of the two TC Titans this spring, I also felt that my kids were engaged and learning online, and any lack of engagement was due more to the grading system set up for 4th quarter instead of the level of instructional. (Shout out here especially to AP Human Geography for the engaging end of the year project).
3. **Ensure that you think about the costs and benefits for different learners, instead of attempting a one-size-fits-all solution.** I teach secondary and have two teens. As a school system responsible for the children of Alexandria, it may be that the reality is that there is an important role for ACPS in childcare, just as we discovered this spring the crucial role that ACPS plays in feeding the young residents of this city. However, the need for childcare is limited to children in elementary school, while children in elementary and secondary both need quality education. Therefore, it may be that some sort of face to face setting is important for the safety of younger children for whom there is no other safe childcare option, while it is safer and more educationally appropriate for older students to learn at home. In addition, children with special needs documented in IEPs and 504s may also have needs that make the need for face to face instruction more urgent. Finally, it may be that certain classes, especially electives are either not possible online (for example, auto technology) or frankly unsafe face to face (for example, choir).

4. **Ensure Equity.** Whatever school looks like in the fall, it needs to support all learners to the maximum safe extent possible. It is important to keep in mind that COVID-19 has disproportionately affected disadvantaged communities and so it may be necessary to err even more on the side of safety in order to protect our most vulnerable students who are already at increased risk of COVID-19. Additionally, as a teacher of English Language Learners, I think that although my students have unique learning needs, it is NOT the case the distance learning is not successful with these students. In fact, I think it would be better for my students to be able to see my face online and clearly hear me than attempt to follow what I am saying behind a mask from six feet away. It is also the case that some communities have more difficulty accessing technology and we may need more strategies for closing the digital divide, such as WIFI busses and socially distant computer labs in school building.

In conclusion, I want to say how thankful I am for Dr. Hutching's clearly outlined process for making decisions and involving all stakeholders, the hard work of teachers to provide quality education this spring and summer while totally re-inventing their jobs, and your hard work making decisions for the fall. I am happy to elaborate on any points I made in this letter if you want any additional information.

Yours truly,

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