

Public Comments for Virtual School Board Meetings #173

I would like to provide: *

Written Public Comments

Select the meeting date:* *

My public comments are related to: *

Virtual+ Plus Learning

Topic *

Request for Accelerated Access to In-Person Learning for More Learners

Full Name *

Patrick Byrnett

What is your relationship to ACPS? *

Parent/Guardian of an ACPS Student

Enter your comments here OR upload below: See next page for submitted comments.

I write today to ask the School Board to support part, but not all, of the Quarter 2: Phased Reentry of Students to School Buildings. Specifically, I ask that the School Board request an accelerated timetable for in-person learning for three groups: (1) Level 1 and Level 2 English Language Learners, (2) students in primary grades (even if done on a smaller scale basis as a pilot), and (3) high school students enrolled in career and technical education (CTE) coursework requiring hands-on experience for industry certifications.

In addition to my role as a proud Mount Vernon Community School parent, I have the unique vantage point of serving as an administrator in another Northern Virginia division amidst this pandemic. The logistical barriers described by Dr. Hutchings and his staff in their October 16 presentation—regarding staffing, transportation, physical redesign, and nutrition—are the most challenging I've encountered in my career. That's even before considering the hurdles teachers and other educators must clear each day to lead instruction in an environment that nullifies many classroom culture techniques and makes assessing student understanding that much more challenging. There are no good options available to schools presently; only options that offer some gains in exchange for added risks in another area.

Decisions, then, come down to how much risk—of what kind, based on what information, and borne by whom—we are willing to accept as a division. It is on this basis that I ask the School Board to approve the proposed plan for the return of special need students in citywide programs—rightly the first group to prioritize—but to require staff to bring a new proposal that would accelerate the time table for in-person learning for other vulnerable populations.

The health risks posed by Covid-19 need not be repeated; they are real and substantial, and the impact has disproportionately fallen on communities with higher concentrations of people of color and lower concentrations of wealth. Counterbalancing that, however, are two significant factors:

- Evidence to date suggests that [schools themselves are not significantly contributing to community spread](#) of the novel coronavirus, and in fact schools have infection rates below those of surrounding communities. Schools that have needed to close due to high infection rates have almost universally been located in states where common sense health mitigation measures—such as mandatory facial coverings and regular and easily available hand sanitation—were not consistently implemented.
- [Projections of learning loss](#) due to schools' physical closure since March are substantial. One consistent element of these projections are that the lost instructional growth falls most heavily on the same populations—non-native English speakers, students in poverty—whose communities are most negatively impacted by the pandemic itself. These estimates are only that—estimates—but they still paint a grim picture of the cost borne by students for whom even the improved remote learning under Virtual+ presents a significant loss of instructional support.

Given these factors, I believe that the proposed Quarter 2 plan errs too far on the side of protecting against health risk at the expense of short- and long-term learning risk. I acknowledge the repeated requests from division leadership that ACPS does not have identical resources (financial, physical, and human) to other divisions and as a result should not offer identical plans. However, it is difficult not to observe that every other Northern Virginia division, as well as DC Public Schools, has proposed to return a higher number and proportion of students, sooner, than the current ACPS plan calls for, as pointed out by Ms. Gentry during her questions during the October 16 hearing.

The staff did not go into great detail as to which factors/resources were so different in ACPS as to justify such a delay, but based on some of the replies, two major questions remain for me:

- Why must nearly all of ACPS' buildings must remain dark until January? If students enrolled in citywide programs will return to concentrated programs at Jefferson-Houston, what prevents utilization of other buildings for at least some limited return of other students?
- What criteria is ACPS using to identify staff readiness to return to work? Is it based on identified (and documented) health risk, or only based on self-reported preference? Were temporary reassignments (across grades or even schools) or other creative staffing solutions explored to address the described gaps between student and staff interest in returning to school? If such approaches were found unworkable, why? Again, other local divisions have worked out solutions to having a higher number and proportion of teachers and staff back in buildings.

From the outside looking in, it is difficult not to conclude that when balancing the interests between what worked best for adults and what worked best for students, adults won the day.

I am confident that staff have a wealth of information that undergird their recommendations, and likely considerations that were important but did not make it into the presentation. While continuing to value that expertise, however, I believe that ACPS could and should accelerate the timeline for a return to in-person learning for at least three priority groups of students:

Level 1 and Level 2 English Language Learners – Even in dual language immersion programs, students who are only beginning their mastery of the English language necessarily have greater difficulty accessing virtual learning resources effectively, whether facing digital challenges of navigating apps or feeling able to ask for help (or having a teacher independently identify that they need it). While it may not be feasible to have all ELL students return to in-person instruction at their base school, given uneven enrollment distribution throughout the city, the “hub” model discussed in the presentation could be used to create multiple ELL hubs where these students could, at a minimum, receive heightened in-person support from ACPS teachers and paraprofessionals during Virtual+ learning.

General education students in grades PK-2 – ACPS leadership already acknowledged family concerns around screen time for young learners in its proposed adjustments (which are greatly appreciated); however, four hours (or more) of screen time four days a week is still much higher than advisable. Further, the virtual format significantly hampers the ability of teachers to assess and intervene with students (for academic or behavioral reasons), and more generally to establish the trusting, positive relationships so critical to learning at this stage.

Even if an accelerated return for all students in primary grades is not feasible, ACPS could still bring at least some students back as a pilot program to pressure test the safety measures within buildings and identify areas to improve before more students return.

Students in select CTE courses – While VDOE waived certain requirements related to students enrolled in CTE coursework (especially providing a waiver from CTE credentialing tests where such tests were relied on for graduation), students enrolled in many CTE courses will still need the hands-on skills conveyed in those courses to be career-ready upon graduation. While VDOE graduation requirements have been relaxed for the 2020-21 school year, industry and employer expectations have not.

Our high school (hopefully soon to be renamed) offers a robust suite of career and technical education courses, many of which can be effectively continued in a virtual environment. However, for those courses that do require hands-on work for effective instruction—automotive technology, cosmetology, electronic systems, culinary arts, and others—ACPS should identify options to enable students to continue to receive hand-on training and experience, even if other coursework for these students remains remote via Virtual+.

Thank you for your consideration. Again, the division has no good options available at this time; everything raises risks in some way for some group, and nothing will please all parties. If there was a right answer, I'm confident our leader, educators, and this Board would have implemented it already. My hope with these suggestions is to offer a pathway that acknowledges these difficulties, continues to prioritize safety, but ensures that the interests of students, especially those most vulnerable, take lead.

With regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Patrick Byrnett". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Patrick" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Byrnett".

Patrick Byrnett

District A

Mount Vernon Community School parent