

April 3rd, 2020

The Honorable Muriel Bowser
Mayor of Washington DC
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC
20004

Chairperson Mendelson and Councilmembers
Council of the District of Columbia
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC
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Dear Mayor Bowser, Chairperson Mendelson and Councilmembers:

On March 13th, in response to the Covid-19 crisis, [Mayor Bowser announced](#) that DC students would go on a week of spring break followed by a week of remote learning. A week later, [Mayor Bowser announced](#) that the period of remote learning would extend to the last week of April. As the Covid-19 crisis continues to spread across the United States, no one can truly determine how long this period of school closures will extend, although several districts in the DC area have extended their closures through May or the rest of the school year.

As you all know, schools play a critical part in the daily life of students, families, and communities by providing an education as well as much needed socio-emotional support to students. While we should be proud of D.C.'s results on the most recent NAEP assessment, those results also show a [persistent and widening achievement gap](#) that is caused by a widening resource and opportunity gap for students in low-income households and historically disinvested neighborhoods. These students are disproportionately black and latinx. The Covid-19 crisis will have a devastating impact on the opportunity gap and the mental health of our students if we do not take concrete steps to ensure all students can stay connected with their schools during this period. This starts with addressing the steep digital divide in D.C.

In a press conference on March 24th, D.C. Public Schools Chancellor Lewis Ferebee, [estimated that about 30% of students do not have access to a computer or tablet at home](#) - and that a similar number do not have an internet connection. Based on the Chancellor's estimates, close to 28,000 students in DC lack devices or connectivity (based on [2018-2019 enrollment numbers](#) from OSSE). Unfortunately, we have a reason to believe that this need is even greater than those estimates show.

While we appreciate the Mayor and education leaders' acknowledgement of this issue and the creation of the [DC Education Equity Fund](#), we must take bolder and more urgent action. We must ensure that schools, educators, parents, and most importantly, students are supported not only through this period of crisis but moving forward. The parent groups and advocacy organizations signing this letter have been doing everything they can to help DCPS, DC PCSB, and their local school communities solve this digital access crisis, but a patchwork approach is not enough, nor equitable for our students. Therefore, we recommend that the city take these immediate actions:

1. **DCPS and public charter schools should immediately release the computer inventory at all schools to students who lack technology at home.** While DCPS has announced they will release computers to high school students, it has not given approval to middle and elementary schools to release their computers. We urge DCPS to expedite the distribution of all their existing inventory of devices to students in all grade levels who are lacking such devices. If more laptops are needed, the city must quickly use DC Education Equity or Federal Stimulus funds and reach out to private companies and foundations in the area to help make up the difference.

2. **Make sure students have adequate internet access at home through distributing wifi hotspots or other means**, such as outfitting school buses with boosted wifi signals as South Carolina and other school districts have done. Public WiFi hotspots have coverage gaps and, due to the shared public use of the resource, are prone to data capacity limitations and security risks. Public WiFi hotspots should consequently be used as a last, temporary resort to plug the digital divide. Where possible, the city should leverage existing programs to expand broadband access to low-income families. Comcast offers a low-cost “Internet Essential” program to qualified low-income DC families, and is offering two free months to new customers to this program who sign up by the end of April. Connect.DC, an existing District program, offers three months of free internet service to DC families who are approved for Comcast’s Internet Essentials. The city should work with Comcast and other service providers to remove restrictions such as those for outstanding debt and undocumented students, and extend the free period for several more months. Other service providers should make the same offers without restrictions. Leveraging these programs will reduce costs and build on existing expertise. Ensuring students have internet access at home must be a priority for the city.
3. **Make sure English Language Learners and students with disabilities are being served in an effective manner.** Equitable access to online distance learning is especially important for these students. There is already a significant opportunity gap between these students and their peers. This gap will grow even larger if these students are not able to access the services they need during school closures. Access to these services is also vital for keeping engaged and avoiding students dropping out of school.
4. **Provide access to technology to students living in shelters, as well incarcerated youth.** The city's largest family shelter does not have wi-fi in the building or a computer lab, leaving multiple students in the same family sharing their parent's phone, which is not sufficient for meeting the requirements of distance learning. The city must work with DHS to ensure that homeless students are prioritized. The DCPS schools within the juvenile secure detention facility (Youth Services Center) and the DC Jail/Correctional Treatment Facility (Inspiring Youth Program) need to be provided the same access to technology as students in the community. DCPS must work with the respective agencies (DYRS and DOC) to ensure that incarcerated students can access virtual learning.
5. **Provide robust technical support hotline to families.** Many families will need individualized technical support as their children set up and learn to use the new devices and establish a broadband Internet connection in the home. It consequently will be vital to have a sufficient number of qualified technical staff available to provide prompt technical support to families by phone.
6. **Be transparent.** To ensure the trust of families and effectively implement the initiatives, it will be important to provide clear communications to families about the process and timeline for distributing devices, Internet access, the DC Educational Equity Fund and how to get technical support and other help. All LEAs, both DCPS and public charter schools, need to make public their plans on these issues.
7. **We urge school leaders to conduct more accurate, standardized surveys of their student populations.** If they have not already done so, we recommend that schools consider using a text-message/phone-based survey to assess students’ device and broadband access needs. An appropriate survey should assess specific questions, such as how many school-age children live in the household, how many functioning devices are in the household, and whether the household has a reliable high-speed Internet connection. Schools should also reach out to homeless shelters, foster parents, and social workers to identify students who may be homeless or in foster care and may lack

access to online learning. We also recommend that LEA's include a tech access survey to be part of the required enrollment documents so that they continue to have this information.

The Covid-19 global health pandemic is an unprecedented crisis that has and will continue to have significant impacts on our communities, our schools, and our city. That is why, as educators, parents, and advocates, we are calling upon our elected officials to take bold and urgent action not just in this time of crisis, but to create long-term equitable solutions to close the digital divide.

Sincerely,

21st Century Schools Fund
ACLU of the District of Columbia
Black Swan Academy
Children's Law Center
DC Fiscal Policy Institute
DC Senior High Alliance of Parents, Principals and Educators
DeCoding Dyslexia DC
Digital Equity in DC Education
Education Town Hall -- We Act Radio
EducationDC.net
EmpowerEd
The Expectations Project
The Homeless Children's Playtime Project
In the Public Interest
Mary Levy
Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia
Serve Your City DC

School Justice Project
Teaching for Change
Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs
Eduardo R. Ferrer, Policy Director,
Georgetown Juvenile Justice Initiative and Visiting Professor, Georgetown Juvenile Justice Clinic
Rochanda Hiligh-Thomas, Executive Director, Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.
Debby Shore, Executive Director, Sasha Bruce Youthwork, Inc.
Washington Teachers Union
Ward 1 Education Council
The Ward 3 -- Wilson Feeder Education Network
Ward 4 Education Alliance
Ward 6 Public Schools Parent Organization
Ward 7 Education Council

CC:

Mr. Paul Kihn, Deputy Mayor of Education
Ms. Hanseul Kang, State Superintendent, OSSE
Dr.. Lewis Ferebee, Chancellor, DCPS
Scott Pearson, Executive Director, DC Public Charter School Board
Cyrus Verrani, Director, Information Technology, DCPS