



WASHINGTON LAWYERS' COMMITTEE
FOR CIVIL RIGHTS AND URBAN AFFAIRS

July 2, 2020

Councilmembers
Council of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

Re: Digital Equity & the FY2021 Budget

Dear Councilmembers:

The Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs urges you to prioritize educational supports for our children as we enter the upcoming academic year by finding an additional \$11 million for student computers, as recommended by the Digital Equity in DC Education parent coalition.

We are two months away from the start of the next school year, yet there is no clarity on how DCPS will provide technology and technology support to meet student learning needs in a hybrid learning model. The Mayor's budget proposal, which would fund the purchase of 11,000 computers, falls far short of providing a device to every student in grades K-12 and provides no detail on how it will address IT support for at-home learners.

COVID-19 has put a spotlight on racial, economic, and social divides in our city, exposing harmful gaps in student experiences and learning outside school, as so many students of color without adequate means still lack a necessary device of their own and/or internet service to access their public education.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, DCPS estimated that just 30 percent of its 52,000 students lack Internet access or computers at home. We strongly believe that estimate was significantly low, based on recent conversations in the past several weeks with teachers and parents indicating that many students still do not have their own device and that a considerable number of households still do not have adequate internet access. As just one example, Kelly Miller Middle School had 564 students in SY 2020-21, 71% of whom are in an "At-Risk" category as defined by DC law; 11% are homeless and 22% have disabilities. Yet just 170 students received a DCPS computer, and the school staff had to work with an organization to find another 65 reconditioned computers for students. Even with the additional computers they distributed, it is hard to believe that only 235 students at that school needed a working device and/or internet access at home.

In light of the growing economic fallout of the pandemic, the number of students without sufficient internet access likely will rise rather than diminish. To ensure all students can access their education remotely this Fall and for the foreseeable future, the Council must invest significant funds into DCPS to ensure that every student in K-12 has a working device and adequate broadband access at home as well as at school. The District's civil

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rights obligation to provide each student equal access to a quality public education requires nothing less.

Some council offices have cited federal funding as a potential way to fund technology. However, DCPS has not released a transparent breakdown detailing how it plans to use the nearly \$25 million in funding from the CARES Act, which allows 12 possible uses of the funds, one of which is educational technology.

The Committee urges you to take action to resolve the uncertainty over how DCPS will fund technology needs before you finalize decisions on the FY21 budget. An additional \$11 million, estimated to purchase an additional 22,000 computers, would ensure that all students in grades K-12 are provided with a device to help them bridge in-school and at-home learning in the next school year.

There are many reasons parents are anxious about next school year. Having technology for their children to learn should not be one of those reasons. Closing the digital divide for our children is a fixable problem if Councilmembers would prioritize it. Please help DCPS fulfill their promise to “every student, every day.” Our children are counting on you.

Sincerely,

/s/ Kent Withycombe

Kent Withycombe
Director, Public Education Project