



MICHELLE WU
BOSTON CITY COUNCIL

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Dear Superintendent Cassellius and School Committee Members,

Thank you for your diligence and efforts in the face of uncertainty and crisis over the last several months. I reach out today as an At-Large City Councilor and a BPS mom—with an appreciation for the layers of complexity underpinning our school conversations, as well as how deeply our families are impacted by BPS decisions and the processes by which these decisions are made. I write in response to the Superintendent's Draft Reopening Plan released yesterday and to share the feedback my office has gathered from community members leading up to this point.

First, we must acknowledge that school districts across the state are left weighing a terrible set of options due to the failure of elected leadership and other government agencies to prioritize creating the conditions for schools to reopen safely this fall. Without universal testing and effective contact tracing while Massachusetts moved through phases of reopening the economy, COVID-19 cases and fatalities are again rising. Without support from policies and budget decisions, families continue to bear financial and emotional stress, worrying about how to protect their safety and health while needing to work to pay for housing, food, child care, and transportation--struggles that existed well before the pandemic now carry life-or-death stakes.

Yet given the realities of the pandemic before us, it is still unacceptable that we are just over a month away from the start of next school year, and dealing with nearly as much uncertainty on schools today as when the pandemic first hit. Educators and families have not had meaningful opportunities to shape district plans, and the resulting proposals feature unworkable solutions that are disconnected from the scale of need our school communities are facing.

Most of all, I have been inspired by the brilliance and thoughtfulness of the students, families, educators, and school community members who continue to offer ideas and resources to ensure that safety and equity guide our decision-making. Our communities are eager to empower schools as community anchors during this crisis, and ready to do the work so that quality, rigorous learning will take place in healthy, nurturing environments.

Please find below the recommendations and concerns that I share on behalf of these community members. Thank you for the opportunity to push for the safe reopening and equitable recovery that our school communities envision.

Sincerely,

Michelle Wu
Boston City Councilor At-Large

BACKGROUND

In recent months, our lives have changed considerably. Boston families have struggled with loss of loved ones to the virus, unemployment, food insecurity, lack of childcare, and looming eviction as a result of the pandemic's impact on the economy. Communities of color have [felt](#) these consequences most acutely, exposing and exacerbating racial inequities that [are](#) consistent across the country. At the same time, following the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade and others, we have seen an anti-racist movement of historic scale and scope [grow](#) and persist.

As with every part of our government and society, Boston Public Schools must act to meet the moment. This starts by creating spaces that cultivate trust and encourage transparency, engaging school community members in honest discussions acknowledging the complexity of our challenges as a district and the structures we need to dismantle and rebuild. Over the last few weeks, my team and I have joined small group conversations with students, families, and educators about their concerns and ideas for school this fall, and we have collected feedback through continued outreach.

Last week, my office hosted a panel and community conversation on a safe and equitable recovery for Boston Public Schools. After hearing from panelists, participants split into small breakout rooms to have conversations about specific concerns and ideas reflecting on the experiences of last school year and looking ahead to reopening this fall.

In these rooms, a student voiced his fears about the ripple effects that a death of a classmate, school staff, or community member would have on his school community. A single mother of four described her struggle with food insecurity while unable to work due to kids needing to be home. A middle-school teacher and high-school teacher from different school backgrounds shared similar concerns about meeting the needs of their most vulnerable students when school resumes. A school leader shared his intention to build a task force of families to listen and meet the needs of his school community. A middle-school teacher offered her vision of hosting socially distanced, outdoor office hours to create touchpoints with her students and their families. A parent expressed her desire to offer support and serve as a resource for her school community in any way she could this fall.

The fact is that our world, our city, and our schools cannot return to “normal.” Our students, families, and educators have a deep understanding of this fact.

The pre-pandemic school system was already failing too many of our students and families, which was highlighted in the [DESE review](#) of Boston Public Schools released right as school

buildings were shut down for the public health crisis. The review outlined inequitable course offerings, inconsistent assessments, ineffective educator evaluation systems, and inaccessible support services for students with disabilities and English Language Learners.

At its most fundamental level, our recovery must leave behind hollow promises to listen and move towards real stakeholder collaboration and community-led action. **This work demands collaborative planning that guarantees Boston’s students, families, educators, and community members the space to reimagine education in Boston.**

PLANNING FOR REOPENING

The Current Draft Reopening Plan does not match the scale of need and public health risks that our school communities are facing.

The plan begins with a foundational principle that “Science will drive the decision” on how to reopen schools. Yet the commitment to following the science and epidemiological data is not operationalized anywhere throughout the document. To the contrary, the plan does not include any commitments for the district to offer testing for COVID-19, nor does it outline infrastructure to carry out contact tracing in case of infection. Instead, the plan relies on self-screening and puts the burden on families. Even after months of questions at City Council hearings and public forums, the district has not provided any protocols for how schools will handle the inevitable situation when a student or school staff member might have been exposed to the virus, or which scenarios would trigger the shutdown of an individual school or the entire district. At several points, the plan defers vaguely to the Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC)’s guidance for how an outbreak might be handled, even though BPHC has not issued any directives in the months since schools were shut down in March 2020, reinforcing the uncertainty that school communities must absorb.

Despite naming a core value that “Nothing is more important than safeguarding the health, well-being and safety of our BPS students, families and staff,” the plan shifts the burden onto families. There is no detailed plan for addressing the full scope of poor air quality and ventilation in many BPS buildings, and no creative suggestions for how to more effectively use the smaller number of buildings that do meet safe air ventilation standards. The plan briefly mentions that water fountains will not be accessible to students because they “are not touchless and cannot be refurbished to include that functionality in time for the start of school in the fall,” with the burden again shifted to families to send students to school with filled reusable water bottles. When noting that physical distancing requirements will mean that school buses must run at lower capacity, instead of finding ways to accommodate students safely, the proposed change

in the plan is to increase the number of students who must walk to school by expanding the walk zone “to decrease the numbers of students who require school bus transportation.” Again, the plan shifts the burden onto families to ensure the safety of students getting to school with fewer supports from the district.

The plan references three options (including all-remote and all in-person), but only describes one in great detail: the “Hopscotch” model that has been widely described as unrealistic. The district continues to cite survey preferences as justification for a proposal for simultaneous teaching of remote and in-person students that educators, students, and families have raised serious concerns about. But survey results are only as meaningful as the questions asked, and families were not given specific details about what this hybrid model would require, or other potential hybrid options.

Feedback from school community conversations have emphasized the need for equity, safety, transparency, community engagement, and planning:

1. BPS should commit to an all-remote start to the school year and take the Hopscotch proposal off the table while planning for a phased-in transition to in-person learning for at least some students and exploring facilities options. Flexibility is important, but the district is losing the remaining runway as teachers and guardians prepare for infinite scenarios without enough visibility into the decision-making factors.
2. Apply to the state for the full professional development period for educators to have time to plan before student learning begins this fall, including setting aside time for school staff to conduct intake with each family to identify the specific needs of that student and family in planning for reopening.
3. Empower educators to spearhead planning for creative solutions on teaching, learning, and regarding facilities considerations, potentially looking at groupings of students in other ways than currently assigned classes.
4. Provide clarity and transparency on how the science and data will inform decisions, including protocols for addressing exposure and potential outbreak of cases, as well as clear guarantee for adequate PPE for all educators, school staff members, and students.
5. Outline specific supports for students who rely on specialized services, including students with disabilities and English Language Learners.
6. Prioritize mental health supports for all students heading into the school year.

Right now, we need to make serious decisions about what a safe, equitable reopening looks like, but those decisions we make in the short-term will have a lasting impact. Families are facing the same uncertainties now as we did when the public health crisis began. We need to move beyond just reacting to crisis and ground our decisions in larger values and long-term goals for fostering equity and resilience in our school communities. Some of these key priorities are outlined below.

PLANNING FOR RECOVERY

Based on conversations and feedback from students, families, educators, schools staff, and community members over the past few weeks and the content of our larger community meeting, we've synthesized the issues into a framework for a safe reopening and equitable recovery below.

To recover from the impacts of the coronavirus crisis and move toward an equitable future for BPS, we need to:

- **Serve families' needs holistically**
- **Trust and empower educators**
- **Ensure safe and healthy facilities**
- **Prioritize mental health and trauma supports**
- **Embed racial justice throughout BPS policies and programs**

SERVE FAMILIES' NEEDS HOLISTICALLY

Well before the pandemic, schools were filling gaps and serving families far beyond academics--providing meals that students depend on, offering before- and after-school programs that keep young people engaged and safe, and organizing community events, among countless other functions. The COVID-19 crisis has further cemented the role of schools as critical hubs for our students, families, and communities. We have needed our schools to act as [food access sites](#), [technology hubs](#), and [health care providers](#); to facilitate communication between all stakeholders; and to aid in the many transitions facing our students.

To meet these needs and to make our communities stronger, we must reimagine and reinvest in schools to be more than just a place where our students learn. We must pour resources into our schools in order to:

1. Meet all students' needs equitably, using a differentiated approach that serves each family

2. Facilitate access points for students' and families' basic necessities, including food, health care, and technology (such as internet access)
3. Hire a full staff of professionals to support school communities within and beyond the classroom
4. Cultivate partnerships with community members and organizations to meet additional needs created by the pandemic, including tutoring and transportation services

An equitable recovery from COVID-19 will require investing in our schools to meet all students' needs and assisting schools in their efforts to offer wraparound services. Taking a whole child approach requires taking a hard look at the gaps in services and outcomes for English Language Learners and students with disabilities (including the issues outlined in the [DESE review](#)) and making fundamental shifts in the way we approach inclusion. It means redefining college and career readiness to reflect a world that is increasingly steeped in new technologies and remote platforms.

And, as community members have highlighted again and again, a safe and equitable recovery for K-12 education is inextricably linked to affordable childcare, stable housing, job security, and accessible transportation. COVID-19 has made clear that we need to take a holistic approach to tackling systemic problems to achieve long term recovery.

TRUST AND EMPOWER EDUCATORS

Our educators are asked to fill many roles in our students' lives--advisors, coaches, mentors, and parent-figures--way beyond the end of the school day, often without enough resources and compensation. Never has the burden on teachers been clearer than in recent months. As the coronavirus spread rapidly in Boston, teachers [transitioned](#) quickly, centering the needs of their students amidst a pandemic. Without adequate professional development and resources, our educators [adapted](#) to remote learning and served as the bedrock of our communities during a time of turmoil and uncertainty. Their expertise should lead the planning for a BPS recovery. Furthermore, we need to be absolutely clear that the safety of our teachers and school staff - and their families by extension - is not a secondary consideration. Asking our educators and school staff to sacrifice their own wellbeing does not serve our children.

Educators have called for a planning process around school reopenings that will ensure the welfare of everyone in our communities, advocating for priorities to include:

1. A delayed start to the school year that allows for adequate planning and preparation at school buildings, and a phased transition to in-person learning that guarantees safety for students and staff, including extended periods of training to prepare for remote, hybrid,

and in-person learning scenarios, and guarantees of adequate and appropriate PPE and testing

2. Seats at the table when BPS and the Boston School Committee are crafting recovery plans related to COVID-19 and future long-term plans
3. Additional support for professional development targeted toward remote learning
4. Reenvisioned systems of assessment for students to reflect the current reality

None of us can accept that last school year's emergency transition to remote learning was the best we can do for our children. And we must also acknowledge that we cannot move towards an equitable recovery for K-12 education in Boston if we do not plan for reopening with those who know most intimately what works and what does not. We need to elevate our educators' leadership and expertise to understand how to operationalize putting safety and equity first.

ENSURE SAFE AND HEALTHY FACILITIES

Before the COVID-19 crisis, Boston Public School buildings were in drastic need of improvement. The [2016 Massachusetts School Building Authority \(MSBA\) School Survey Report](#) found 34 of 114 Boston school buildings surveyed--more than one-quarter--need significant renovations in order to be deemed environments conducive to teaching and learning. Not only are many of our schools dilapidated and unhealthy for our students, but they are also ill-equipped for learning in today's technological environment. COVID-19 has exacerbated these existing shortcomings in the safety and health of our schools, turning air quality challenges and crowded spaces into serious health risks and a matter of life or death.

To make a return to in-person learning possible, schools must ensure there are systems in place to meet the physical needs of our school communities. With the risk of airborne COVID-19 transmission, such needs [include](#) adequate airflow, personal protective equipment, accessible testing for the virus, and layouts suited for distancing guidelines. Schools also must [continue](#) to meet other health standards where we have fallen short, including clean bathrooms, temperature control, and well-lit, mold-free buildings.

As we've heard from students, families, educators, and community members, BPS should prioritize:

1. Investing in infrastructure, such as ventilation and increased classroom capacity, necessary to make schools safe during COVID-19
2. Ensuring protocols, including social distancing, sanitization, and testing, are in place for in-person learning during COVID-19
3. Guaranteeing that all BPS students have access to Internet, broadband, and other technology in schools and from home

A safe and equitable recovery for K-12 education requires structural changes to our physical school spaces before we return to fully in-person learning. Our school buildings should reflect the needs of the moment, guaranteeing that BPS students come back to safe, healthy, and adaptable spaces. Our schools must also ensure that the recovery is equitable and reduces existing disparities across student groups and schools in terms of access to safe facilities, adequate health resources, and modern technology.

PRIORITIZE MENTAL HEALTH AND TRAUMA SUPPORTS

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, BPS struggled to provide adequate resources to serve the needs for mental health and trauma supports among our students. During the pandemic, the challenges in providing these supports to our students have grown exponentially. With the loss of informal, in-person interactions, relationships have shifted and educators haven't been able to check in everyday with every child. The weight of the pandemic has taken a toll on our students, with over 14,000 contacts from students accessing BPS hotlines for mental health services. Students are absorbing the stress of their families--and the disproportionate burdens borne by Black and brown families during the pandemic--grieving lost loved ones, facing health crises, and grappling with housing, job, and food insecurity. They are coping with new realities of upended routines and fewer social interactions. Some are withstanding [prolonged exposure to abuse](#) due to extended time at home instead of in school. Increases in screen time can adversely [impact](#) mental health. And a return to any form of in-person learning may [coincide](#) with a heightened paranoia about contracting the virus, inhibiting learning and presenting an entirely new challenge to educators. All of these mental health challenges [are exacerbated](#) in communities of color disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

Again, BPS must work to address short-term and long-term mental health and trauma support needs. Community members have repeatedly mentioned both the unique challenges wrought by COVID-19 and the existing inadequacies of BPS in these arenas. Students, parents, educators, and community members have called for:

1. Equitable access to quality mental health and trauma supports for all BPS students, including remote access
2. Adequate staffing of trained counselors, nurses, and community liaisons in school communities
3. Greater emphasis on [social-emotional learning](#) as was necessary even before the pandemic
4. Recognition of the long-term mental health impacts of this pandemic, with student voices to shape the services available and forms of outreach

Our students must feel safe and comfortable in their school environments before they can fully engage with learning. Schools need to have the appropriate professional staff and enough staff so that all students are heard and welcome especially when they are grappling with the many sources of emotional and social stress from the pandemic.

EMBED RACIAL JUSTICE THROUGHOUT BPS POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

Boston has yet to fully reckon with its legacy of socioeconomic and racial inequality. The Black Lives Matter movement and the [disproportionate impacts](#) of COVID-19 have shed light on a history of inequality and discrimination which manifest in dramatically different outcomes for our communities of color. These inequities are entrenched in [health](#), [housing](#), and [economic opportunity](#). Systemic racism is [present](#) and [perpetuated](#) in our public education system, too.

Closing achievement gaps and creating schools in which all students feel a sense of belonging in their communities, comfort in their identities, and empowerment in their own education will require addressing the lasting consequences of decades of discriminatory policy. Members of our community have called for immediate steps to include:

1. Embedding antiracism in the fabric of our schools with antiracist training for school staff and revamped curricula
2. Demilitarizing our schools by removing metal detectors and school police so that schools feel like places of learning for our students, not prisons
3. Addressing the school-to-prison pipeline, in which students of color face discipline at disproportionate rates
4. Eliminating surveillance of undocumented students and their families at our schools

For too long, our students of color have been held back by the legacy of discriminatory policies, underinvestment, and neglect. By reevaluating the policies, programs, and initiatives of BPS and by ensuring that everyone in our community can have their voices heard, we can create a school system that ensures equity, instills racial justice, and lives up to Boston's ideals.

The priorities outlined above are a starting point towards building a better BPS. In this moment of uncertainty and urgency, we must marshal every resource and every ounce of political will to redesign school communities to truly serve our students and their families. With all community members at the table, we can implement a safe BPS reopening, build towards an equitable recovery from COVID-19, and deliver the opportunities our students deserve.