



May 18, 2020

Chair Dolan, Vice-Chair Burke, Ranking Member Sykes, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

I would like to begin by thanking Senator Kunze for the invitation to provide written testimony today on the topic of re-opening schools for the 2020-2021 school year and to thank all of you for your time and consideration.

By way of background, Columbus City Schools is the State's largest school district, with approximately 50,000 students attending more than 100 schools and programs. We employ around 10,000 individuals – from bus drivers to teachers, food service workers to principals, school nurses to mechanics. About eight percent of our students are identified as gifted and talented, and 18 percent of our students have exceptional needs. Additionally, around 17 percent of our students come from a family for which English is not the primary language, with more than 100 different languages spoken throughout the District.

I share this to provide you all with some context as to the challenges that exist in operating a district of our size and scope in the best of times, let alone during the current COVID-19 crisis. As we continue to discuss how we will re-open in the coming school year, I believe it is important for you all to understand the enormity of the task at hand – not only for our district, but for every district around the State.

Uncertainty is the greatest factor we currently face – uncertainty for the educational program our families may need and want during this crisis, uncertainty of what our revenues may be as the State discusses further reductions, uncertainty of what our expenses may be in order to bring students back safely. Uncertainty is what keeps me awake at night – uncertainty for our students and their families, uncertainty for our community, uncertainty for our staff.

I know that you do not have all of the answers, and I applaud you for taking the time to gather additional information so as to make better informed decisions in the weeks and months ahead. I would like for you to take the time to consider the following:

- **Face masks** – will all students and staff be required to wear face masks when they return? If so, what is our obligation to provide these masks? Are there enough masks available for purchase in the open market to meet demand? As noted previously, with around 50,000 students and 10,000 staff, the cost could reach millions of dollars for our district alone if such a requirement is put into place.

- **Hand sanitizer** – would we need to place hand sanitizer at the entrance to each classroom, in high traffic areas, and at locations of ingress / egress? If so, is the fire marshal willing to relax the rules on the number of hand sanitizers throughout the building as they are flammable? Again, with more than 100 buildings – schools and otherwise – these costs will easily rise into the millions of dollars.
- **Cleaning** – will there be a requirement to clean and disinfect areas (including handrails, door knobs, desks, computers, etc.) after a group of students leaves a facility or classroom, including between class changes, between groups in the cafeteria (if we continue to use them), and after each school day? If so, we will need to add more staff to our buildings to keep up with the cleaning, which again potentially could easily reach into the millions of dollars given the sheer number of our buildings.
- **Transportation** – will we be required to take temperatures of students before they get onto a bus? What do we do with students who have a fever – are we required to send, say, a 2nd grade student back home where no one may be there? If not, will we place a potentially infected student on a bus with other students, thus impacting their health and safety as well as that of the driver? Will we need to install barriers to protect our drivers? If so, with more than 800 buses in our fleet, it will take time and resources – all with less than three months to go prior to the start of school. If we have to run buses at half capacity, what would this mean for routing? We currently provide transportation to accommodate more than 40,000 students and nearly 100 different school calendars and bell schedules when you factor in community schools and non-public schools.
- **Education Delivery** – given all of the above, will there be flexibility for districts to operate? Will we need to run a staggered school day? A blended-learning model with a mix of online and in-person education? Or will we need to continue to operate in a totally virtual capacity?

These are just a few of the uncertainties that concern me. And while I, too, do not have all of the answers, please know that my team and I are currently thinking through them. In some instances, we will need to make some difficult decisions. In others, we will need assistance from you in providing the flexibility we need – some additional certainty – as we prepare to return for the next academic year.

- We need greater flexibility in the delivery of education. While the State Superintendent has the authority under HB 197 to move the July 1st deadline required to provide notification of a blended-learning model, explicit authority waiving those deadlines would provide much needed certainty.
- Additionally, districts should be granted the authority to operate an e-school if they so choose. Some parents – and even staff – may feel uneasy about returning for the next school year for a variety of reasons. It also provides an additional option for schools as they look at the extent to which they may re-open. Columbus City Schools is currently considering such a model for the

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next school year; authority to do so would remove yet another uncertainty.

- The three-day maximum for the use of online lessons to make up lost instructional time should be repealed. The current relief is only for the 2019-2020 school year.
- Provisions need to be made to streamline transportation services between districts and charter/non-public schools. Bell schedules need to be minimized if there is to be effective transportation provided in the fall, especially if we will need to operate reduced schedules. The requirements under 3327.015 need to be held in abeyance for this school year in the event adjustments need to be made. Additionally, meeting guidance of local or state health officials regarding social distancing could potentially be added to the list of items for which impractical to transport determinations may be made.
- Given the additional costs that are likely looming as we look to the next school year – face masks, hand sanitizer, increased cleaning, transportation, and additional investments in education technology and infrastructure – we also cannot see additional cuts to the Foundation or Student Wellness & Success Funds. While increased costs and possible reductions should not be the primary driver of the actions we take in the months ahead, they also cannot be ignored.

We have transitioned quickly to online education, and our District has continued to provide meals and services to our students during these past few months. We will continue to do what is in the best interest of our students, but we cannot do it alone. Please provide us with additional clarity, with additional certainty, as we make our decisions to safely re-open our schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Talisa L. Dixon".

Talisa L. Dixon, Ed.D.
Superintendent/CEO