

US Senate HELP Committee testimony
Denver Public Schools Superintendent Susana Cordova
Wednesday, June 10, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the challenges that our community in Denver has come together to work through and adjust to the COVID-19 public-health crisis.

On March 12, facing the clear signs that the virus was beginning to spread more quickly and getting closer to our campuses, we made the decision to close schools two weeks ahead of our scheduled spring break.

At that time, as strange as it seems now, we were planning on returning to our regular school calendar and operations during the first week of April.

On March 20, with an even clearer indication of how potent and deadly COVID is, we came to the realization that it would be a long time before we could resume in-person instruction.

Then, with roughly two weeks to go until school resumed after spring break, we turned our full attention, resources, and collaboration to putting together a remote-learning program for 93,000 students—children from around the globe, with a wide range of socio-economic status and access to technology, and speaking many different languages at home.

Because of the varying needs, backgrounds, and resources among our families, we built a remote-learning plan that gave our educators some flexibility to decide how best to connect with their students.

That turned out to be an effective approach, as we feel like we had a strong last two months of the school year as 100% remote learning.

Throughout the final eight weeks of the 2019-20 school year, we saw average attendance rates around 87%, which is just a few percentage points below the previous year's.

In addition to working hard to ensure we kept our teachers and students connected for academic growth, we also focused on providing as much of the wrap-around support and service we could, even with our buildings closed.

Over the past three months, we've distributed over 732,000 meals, through our own Food Services Team and in partnership with the city and our DPS Foundation and its philanthropic partners.

The city-run health centers that operate in our schools have remained open for telehealth and in-person appointments throughout the spring at three DPS locations, providing care for all students who need it at no cost to families.

We sent a technology survey to our families to ask them what they needed to help with remote learning, and we purchased an additional 9,000 laptop computers to help meet the need.

To support our families with remote learning, we ended up distributing over 55,000 laptops and 2,700 wifi hotspots.

And given the number of low-income families in Denver, ensuring equitable internet access for remote learning continues to be one of our biggest unmet challenges.

We go into next school year knowing that some of our highest-priority students—those who need extra instructional attention—have fallen further behind, because of our buildings being closed and not being able to assure internet access across the city.

In mid-May, we put together a Workgroup of educators—primarily principals and teachers—to help us put together a plan for the new school year.

To help ensure we put together a plan that was attentive to the priorities and needs of our family and staff, we sent out a community-wide survey asking them what they wanted us to focus our planning on.

The message to us from that survey was loud and clear: prioritize health and wellness.

As a result, we partnered with the leadership of Denver Health and the Denver Department of Public Health and Environment to put together a set of health standards that served as the foundation for all of our return-to-school planning.

Those health standards include:

- Wellness screenings upon arrival.
- Health measures enforced throughout the school day: wearing of masks; frequent hand-washing; continuous, thorough cleaning and disinfecting of the entire school facility.
- Classroom occupancy limited to allow for a minimum of 6 feet of physical distancing.
- Limited student movement in the school throughout the day and no large gatherings.

On top of those measures, we will be creating policies that provide an extra level of protection and care for the DPS Community.

That will include creating specific policies for staff and students who are at higher medical risk, either because of their own health or because they live with someone who is at a higher medical risk.

If there is the possibility of a resurgence of cases in a classroom, due to a student or staff member testing positive, health officials are advising that it is likely that that classroom will stop in-person instruction immediately and move to entirely remote learning for at least 14 days.

To help our families understand and start to get comfortable with how different school will look under these health guidelines, we put together [a video](#) in multiple languages to show how schools will look and operate when they reopen.

With health and safety as our highest-priority, we are planning at this time for a mix of in-person and remote learning when the school year starts in August.

As much as we'd like to have a full return to full-time in-person learning, we remain committed to following the advice of our health experts and keeping health and wellness as the overriding priority in our plans.

On Friday, May 29, we shared with our community 3 scheduling options for a mix of in-person and remote learning:

- A two-day block each week (Tuesday-Wednesday or Thursday-Friday, for example) of in-person learning, with the remaining 3 days offering remote learning.
- An alternating two-day schedule (Tuesday-Thursday or Wednesday-Friday) of in-person learning each week, with the remaining 3 days offering remote learning.
- And an alternating-week scheduling option, which would provide four continuous days of in-person instruction in one week, along with one day of remote learning, followed by a full five-day week of remote learning the following week.

Option 1: 2-Day Block (AA/BB) Schedule for In-Person Learning.
Students will have remote learning the remainder of the week.

Monday *	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Additional In-Person Learning for Priority Students	Group A	Group A	Group B	Group B

Option 2: Alternate-Day (AB/AB) Schedule for In-Person Learning.
Students will have remote learning the remainder of the week.

Monday *	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday

Additional In-Person Learning for Priority Students	Group A	Group B	Group A	Group B
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Option 3: Full-Week Rotating (AAAA/BBBB) Schedule for In-Person Learning.

Students will have remote learning on alternating weeks.

	Monday *	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Week 1	Additional In-Person Learning for Priority Students	Group A	Group A	Group A	Group A
Week 2	Additional In-Person Learning for Priority Students	Group B	Group B	Group B	Group B

**The day that's set aside for additional in-person learning for priority students may be switched to a different day of the week.*

It's important to note that in each of those options, students who we consider to be priority learners—those who need additional attention—will receive a full, additional day of in-person instruction each week.

Those priority students are students with disabilities and students who are in the early stages of learning English.

And then each school will work on including as many additional student groups as possible for the extra day of in-person learning, including:

- Students who are not on track to graduate
- Students from historically underserved populations
- Students from low-income households

We feel that this is an important equity measure that will help mitigate the effects of learning loss from the switch to remote learning at the end of last school year.

Overall, each option provides for every student to receive at least 40% of their overall learning through in-person instruction, with priority students receiving up to 60% in-person instruction.

To get feedback from our staff and community, we sent another follow-up survey with the details of these options.

That survey closes on Friday, and we will review the feedback from the survey and some targeted focus groups we're doing this week to help us reach the best decision on the final plan for returning to school in August.

I'm extremely proud of Team DPS's hard work and relentless focus on equity in serving our families and our community over the past three months.

We've remained both steadfast in our values and nimble in our execution. And we've received invaluable support and collaboration from our partners across Denver and Colorado.

Governor Jared Polis and his health and education teams have been especially valuable partners.

They have provided strong leadership on the priority of community health and limiting the impact of the virus. And they have been responsive to and understanding of the immense challenges we've faced in developing remote learning programs amidst the anxiety and rapidly changing conditions of the COVID crisis.

We are also grateful for the help we've received from the federal government through the CARES Act.

We're currently facing a \$61 million budget shortfall due to the economic impact of the COVID crisis, and the CARES Act will provide some help in covering lost revenue and additional costs related to COVID.

But we still have a lot of work to do to balance our budget and ensure we have the resources to devote to educating all of Denver's students while maintaining our priority of health and wellness and our focus on equity.

Under normal conditions, we are stretched thin on resources.

We've had to go to Denver's voters 4 times over the past 15 years to ask for additional local tax revenue in order to meet the needs of our schools and students.

We're now, despite the highest unemployment since the Great Depression, very likely going to still have to go back to voters to ask for more local taxes on this November's ballot.

At a time when our kids and our community needs us the most—for education and all of the support our schools provide—we're having to make massive cuts.

We're doing our best to tighten our belts and streamline operations.

The last thing we want to do is have staff reductions. We just went through that last year, and we need our people to be able to provide the best schooling and backup support we can right now.

That's why we're so appreciative and supportive of Governor Polis's efforts to bring in additional federal funding for education, through these two pieces of proposed legislation:

The Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund would provide Colorado with \$44 million for grants to help local educational agencies (LEAs), institutions of higher education (IHEs), and other education-related entities that have been most significantly impacted by COVID-19.

And the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund would provide \$121 million to school districts with a focus on equity and prioritizing the school districts that serve students with the highest needs.

Our schools and our educators are working so hard to step up for our kids and our community during these challenging times.

Additional funding with flexibility is essential to us and to our families to make sure their kids are continuing to grow academically and come through this pandemic with a great future still ahead of them.

As we look to next year, it will be essential for us to prioritize the dual imperatives of supporting the social emotional needs of our students, many of whom have been highly impacted by COVID-19, as well as their academic needs. We know that in Denver, 70% of the people who have contracted COVID-19 have been LatinX, and as a district serving 60% LatinX students, we anticipate that, when our students return at the end of the summer, we will be on the front lines of supporting them as they process their experiences from this long period of remote learning.

Thank you.