Welcome Back
School Visits, Two Cheers for Mayor/Chancellor's In-Person return,
Letters from CM Cheh & SBOE

Welcome back to everyone! Plus a special welcome to new families and new staff--and especially to our students. Some of our students are returning to schools they have been enrolled in but have barely, if ever, seen! But all are entering schools with COVID rules that profoundly affect the school experience; and all adults, parents and staff, are entering a third year of pandemic schooling. Who could have imagined this when our school first closed down in March 2020.

I also wish a special welcome to the five new principals in Ward 3--Principal Singh at Janney, Principal Pineda at Oyster, interim Principal Anderson at Eaton, Principal Rivas at Stoddert, and veteran assistant principals, now interim principals at their song-time schools, Interim Principal Anderson at Eaton and Interim Principal Bargeman at Wilson.

I wish all of our departing principals the very best in their next lives. We will miss them!

*great BTS graphic, h/t Deal back to school email!
Through early August, I joined Ward 3 Councilmember Mary Cheh for her annual back-to-school visits. I got to visit every school (except Eaton, which was getting its finishing touches) in the ward, plus Hardy Middle School (located in neighboring Ward 2). As we always do, we flushed every toilet, turned on every faucet, and checked the status of every water fountain (In most years, the purpose is to check for lead; this year, the purpose is to make sure the regular ones are off to prevent germ spread and that each school has either a water bottle filler or plenty of bottles of water.). We were also able to ask each principal if he/she had needed materials. On the visits, school custodial staff and staff from both the DC Public Schools (DCPS) facilities team and the Department of General Services (DGS) joined us, working to get quick action on remaining maintenance issues, small and large. Since then, staff from CM Cheh’s office have been working with schools to follow-up on still-undone work.

The good news is that, in general, the schools looked great! Teachers were getting their classes ready, principals had largely worked out protocols for staggering entry and exit and were working through how to create rules for a safe lunch, PPE seemed plentiful. With almost no exceptions, schools already had their special HEPA filters positioned in every classroom. (One concern was that at that point, some of the smaller instructional sites were not yet equipped with HEPA filters, especially those where just a few students came to get individual support from a one adult.) We could see much of the needed maintenance in process or on order. And there was confidence that any remaining repair projects would be handled in the the Summer Blitz, scheduled at the end of each summer as a final intensive push to get everything done before school opened.

*I've put photos of the visits throughout this newsletter.*
The bad news: Clearly too much of the work is left for the Summer Blitz, leaving people convinced that the urgent work would all be completed, when in fact that was probably unrealistic. I know of A/C failures affecting more than one W3 school, and I am aware of at least a dozen other schools with HVAC issues days before school opens to students--and that's just the ones that have been publicized! This problem of late repairs, especially with HVAC, is getting lots of attention this season because of COVID concerns. But, seriously, it's time for this to change. The Blitz needs to be Blitzed in early summer and done by the beginning of August, leaving August for folks to to get their rooms ready and to deal with final, unexpected, or unpredictably difficult challenges. We really need to find a way to change this process.

Also problematic: Orders for outdoor furniture and tents--which were being counted on for safe lunch and to enable large classes to meet outside--hadn't arrived, and COVID-related delays meant they might not arrive before mid-September.

Two cheers for the Mayor and DCPS

For most students, in-person education is the best--no question about it! For most parents, having their kids in school is necessary, desirable, or both. For most families and students, last year was very, very tough; repeating it would be unsustainable. It was right for the Mayor and DCPS to make it a top priority to open school for 5-day a week, full-time in person school.

But if we want students and adults safe and if we want schools to stay open, the safety protocols need to be more serious. Many, many thanks to the Mayor for ultimately responding to public outcry and revising (as of this past Friday) the rules for random testing, making such tests "opt-out" not opt-in, and thus increasing the participation in the testing and its usefulness. I would test even more. But, this meets CDC's guidelines, and I trust that it will alert us to spread so that families can be alerted and schools can take needed steps.
• **Lunch.** Students will be largely unmasked as they eat and drink. Every school I know is hoping to require outdoor lunch or provide it as an option, leaving plenty of room for those eating indoors. But without outdoor furniture and tents, which still have not arrived at all schools, this will be "challenging" if the weather doesn't cooperate.

• **Social Distancing of at least 3’.** Schools are encouraged, not required, to have 3’ social distancing. As a result, in the most overcrowded schools, students will be sitting substantially closer together than 3’. This should not be permitted. The best alternative is moving outdoors which, *again,* in rain *requires outdoor furniture and tents. It also requires outdoor wifi.*

• **Mandatory vaccines for students aged 16+.** Staff is required to be double vaccinated by Sept 19 (or take a weekly test). With FDA’s full approval of a COVID vaccine for anyone aged 16+, we need to have the same requirement for students, ASAP.

• **A virtual option.** In-person schooling should be the priority. But, some families need a virtual option. At our State Board of Education meetings, I have heard from families with real fears of a child bringing the virus home to a household with siblings, parents, grandparents or others who are immune-compromised. We can do better than this! Councilwoman Mary Cheh put this very well:

"There is no doubt that an in-person education provides the highest standard of learning and social/emotional growth, but there are also many DCPS families who attend schools in areas with low vaccination rates and growing case rates. There are also many immunocompromised residents and multi-generational families/caregivers who live in the same household as DCPS students…. the level of risk faced by each family is just simply not the same..."

In his comments on WAMU's Politics Hour with Kojo last Friday, it seemed the Chancellor may be rethinking this policy. I hope so.

**For a full copy of CM Cheh’s excellent list of "critical steps" that need to be taken,** [see her newsletter here](https://us10.campaign-archive.com/?u=85e8942e231fcdcbd415443fa&id=7a4e857f62).
minimize spread and the support and resources for schools to put them into place.

Let me know how things are going!

SBOE Update--unanimous letter urges better testing, mandatory vaxx, virtual option

On August 18, the State Board of Education held a special meeting to hear what families, staff, and residents had to say about our re-opening. We heard gratitude that schools were reopening, concerns about specific conditions, and fear, especially from those in households where siblings, parents, grandparents and others were immune-compromised, who were being told that their non-compromised students were required to attend school in person. I am hopeful that the Chancellor is now rethinking this policy, something that was suggested in his comments on WAMU’s Politics Hour with Kojo last Friday. Here is the letter that the State Board of Education sent to the
Welcome back, 2 Cheers for reopening plans, School visits

Have a great school year!

Keep in touch!

As always, if you have thoughts on the above or other suggestions, feel free to email me, ruth4schools@yahoo.com.

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